

An (Incomplete) Timeline of British Slavery and Abolition
English 8500
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1554-1555: Early establishment of the English slave trade as practiced by privateers

1569: The case of Cartwright, arrested for battery against another man that he claimed was his slave, brought from Russia to England. The courts ruled against Cartwright:

“one Cartwright brought a Slave from Russia, and would scourge him, for which he was questioned; and it was resolved, That England was too pure an Air for Slaves to breath in. And indeed it was often resolved, even in Star-Chamber, That no Gentleman was to be whipt for any offence whatsoever; and his whipping was too severe” (From a 1721 report of the 1569 case)

Olusoga writes:

1619: Twenty Africans brought ashore at Jamestown; Olusoga notes that they were not trafficked directly by the British but had been taken from Portugese slavers (72)

1660: Charles II gives a charter for the African trade to the "Company of Royal Adventurers Trading to Africa" (Olusoga 73). Olusoga identifies this act as inaugurating Britain's entrance into the slave trade.

1661: Barbados Slave Code (Olusoga 69); distinguishes between white indentured servants and black slaves, i.e. "chattel slavery"

1672: Charles II establishes the Royal African Company; given the right to draw upon the power of the Royal Navy to assist in establishing slaving monopolies.

Olusoga notes that this marks an interesting moment in the history of the slave trade, and indicates the ways in which discourses of "British liberty" intersect with its establishment as a slaving power: Private slave traders "launched a political campaign against the Royal African Company, demanding that access to the slave trade be made a right of all Englishmen . . . Stone-blind to irony, they argued, audaciously and amorally, that the right to enslave Africans was defining feature of English freedom" (74)

1696: Jamaican Slave Act

1696: Chamberlain vs. Harvey where Chief Justice Holt "concluded that black people could not be defined as merchandise since English law did not recognize them as being different to other people, Christian or not. However, Holt judged that while black people could not be recognized by the law as slaves, they could be regarded as 'slavish servants', occupying a station not dissimilar to that of an apprentice" (Olusoga 119-120)

1701: *Smith v. Brown and Cooper* where Chief Justice Holt states that "As soon as a negro comes into England, he becomes free. One may be a villein in England but not a slave" (Olusoga 120)

1712: The Royal African Company loses its monopoly, opening up the way for the expansion of the slave trade by private traders (Olusoga 75)

England at the center of the triangular slave trade [i.e. textiles rum, and goods sent to Africa from England; slaves acquired in Africa and sent to North America; Slave produced sugar, tobacco, and cotton sent to England]

Olusoga notes that even as power is centralized in slave-holding colonies, emigration to England by Blacks steadily increases: "In the last decades of the seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century, Africans arrived as slaves and as free people in greater numbers than in any previous period . . . The presence of these black Georgians became a recognized symbol of the burgeoning new age of globalism, prosperity, and brutality" (76)

1729: The Yorke-Talbot slavery opinion: in which the English courts declared that a slave's status did not change when he came to England, and that Christian baptism did not change that status; as Olusoga notes, this was an informal "opinion" given at a dinner where the Attorney-General Sir Philip Yorke and the Solicitor-General Charles Talbot were entertained by British men involved in the slave trade and nascent imperial expansion. Their opinion stated that 'a slave coming from the West-Indies to Great Britain or Ireland, with or without his master, doth not become free, and that his master's property or right in him' remained unchanged" (121)

1751 John Newton, *A Slave Trader's Journal*; collected in [the Olney Hymns](#), along with poetry by William Cowper

1763: The Jonathan Strong and Granville Sharp incident (Olusoga 113>)

1769, Granville Sharp, *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery, or of Admitting the Least Claim of Private Property in the Persons of Men, in England*

1770, John Newton, "Amazing Grace"

1771: *R v Stapylton*: In this case, the courts ruled against a slave owner (Stapylton), who had attempted to deport Thomas Lewis, whom he claimed as his slave. Lewis was allowed to testify, and Stapylton could not prove that Lewis was owned by him. As Olusoga notes, no definitive statement about the status of slavery was made at this time. The sitting judge, Lord Mansfield, stated that "whether [slave owners] have this kind of property or not in England has never been solemnly determined", and remained determined not to rule on the legality of British slavery (Olusoga 127)

1772: The Mansfield Judgment Abolitionists issued a writ to release James Somerset, a slave confined on a ship from Virginia that was bound for Jamaica. The question now became one of an enslaved individual's *rights* rather than those of the slave owner. Citing earlier judgments, and with great reluctance, Lord Mansfield ruled that a man held as a slave elsewhere could not be forced to leave England. While stopping short of issuing a judgment on slavery in England, Mansfield does state: "The state of slavery is of such a nature, that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political, but only by positive law, which preserves its force long after the reasons, occasion, and time itself from when it was created is erased from memory. [Slavery] is so odious, that nothing can be suffered to support it, but positive law. Whatever inconveniences, therefore, may follow from the decision, I cannot say that this case is allowed or approved by the law of England; and therefore the black must be discharged" (Olusoga 137). Olusoga's account of the trial is detailed and persuasive (127-142)

1772: James Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, As related by himself*

1773: Thomas Day and John Bicknell, *The Dying Negro, a Poetical Epistle, supposed to be written by a black, (who lately shot himself on board a vessel in the River Thames;) to his intended wife*

1773: Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773)

1774: John Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery* (abolitionist)

1774: Joseph Knight vs. John Wedderburn. Joseph Knight, held as a slave sought his freedom in a court case against Wedderburn. The Scottish courts declared that Knight was a free man in Scotland, whose laws were more just than those in Jamaica.

1781: The Zong Incident, in which a British slave ship jettisons 133 slaves into the sea in order to collect insurance

1782 *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*

1785 Richard Price, from *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution*

1785 Arrival of Black Loyalists in London; leads to the establishment of the [Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor](#)

1786 Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*

1787 Formation of the [Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in London](#)

1787 Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*

1787-1788 Failure of the first Sierra Leone settlement

1788-1792: Period of intense abolitionist agitation led by Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, organized agitation on the part of Quakers and Non-Conformists

1788: Slave Trade Act of 1788, which restricted the number of people that could be transported on the slave ships; first act that attempted to regulate the slave trade at all

1788 John Newton, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*
Thomas Clarkson, *Impolicy of the Slave Trade*
Hannah More, *Slavery, a poem*
Ann Yearsley, *A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade*
William Roscoe, *The Wrongs of Africa*
Alexander Falconbridge, *Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*
William Cowper, "Sweet meant has Sour Sauce, or The Slave Trader in the Dumps"
Nicholls, *Observations occasioned by the Attempts Made in England to Effect the Abolition of Slavery*

1788-1789

Wilberforce introduces evidence against the slave trade to Parliament, makes extensive use of investigative material compiled by abolitionists, including Falconbridge and Clarkson, attempting to get the slave trade outlawed entirely

1789

Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*

Wilberforce, "Speech to the House of Commons"

April 1791 William Wilberforce's bill for Abolition of the Slave Trade is defeated

1791

Anna Letitia Barbauld, "Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. on the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade"

Second Sierra Leone settlement consisting of Black Loyalists from Nova Scotia

August 1791 San Domingo slave and freed slaves agitate against planters and government

1792 Petition campaign for abolition; the House of Commons resolves on a principle of gradual abolition by 1796; struck down by the House of Lords. Abolitionists begin to boycott the consumption of sugar. but abolition efforts are complicated by worsening conditions in France and the beginning of war with France

1793 Wilberforce's second bill for abolition passed by the House of Commons but defeated in the Lords

1794 The French abolish slavery in their colonies

1795-1799 Commons repeatedly defeats bills of abolition

Coleridge lectures against the slave trade in Bristol

1799-1804 Low period of abolition agitation

1804 The House of Commons pass a general abolition bill but the House of Lords tables the motion; abolition agitation increases again

1807 Slave Trade Act , prohibits the slave trade but does not end colonial slavery

William Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*

1808 Thomas Clarkson, *The History of Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Slave Trade by the British Parliament*

1809 *Poems on the abolition of the slave trade*

1811 Parliament makes slave trading a felony

1811-1823 Continuous agitation in England for international abolition of slavery

1823 Clarkson and Wilberforce found The Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions

1831 Massive slave revolt in Jamaica

1832 English Reform Bill, which enfranchised more of the British middle classes, but still left many working men without the vote, as well as all women

1833 Abolition of Colonial Slavery: allowed for gradual emancipation, forcing slaves to work as "apprentices" for six years; also compensated former owners

1838 Immediate Abolition Act: rescinded the apprenticeship clause