HUMAN RESOURCES

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Slavery and the Making of Modern Britain in 39 Institutions, People, Places and Things

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with
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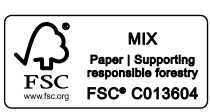

For Auguste and Sage, the air I breath and the star that guides me.

RR

For my four grandparents, whose strength, inspiration and sacrifices have allowed me to be who I am.

AL

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Introduction

At some point during our school education, we, like many others, came to the realisation that, in the classroom, all the bad things that had happened in the past – the so-called 'lessons of history' – always seemed to have happened elsewhere. Fascism, eugenics and genocide in Germany; authoritarianism in Russia and China; slavery and racism in America, to name a few. But these things had never been done in, or perpetrated by, Britain. Britain was always a powerhouse of democracy, progress, industry and modernity.

This might help explain our surprising inability as a society to reckon with the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. We might see it as a definitive historical atrocity, or as a sad fact about a more brutal period in human existence. We might even feel some pride that Britain had a role in bringing about its abolition. But overall, we tend to think of slavery as done with – a grim chapter that no longer needs to be revisited, and that mostly occurred elsewhere. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The transatlantic slave trade began in the sixteenth century and lasted until the early nineteenth century, a period when Europeans forcibly captured people from West and central Africa and transported them to the Americas and the Caribbean

to be sold for profit. Throughout history, and even as historians work to uncover their stories, these people's identities have mostly been lost. Often, all we know about them are the unbelievably brutal conditions in which they lived, worked and died. Before they were enslaved, these people were musicians, farmers, religious leaders, teachers, merchants and healers. They were mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. They were in the middle of these lives when they were taken.

Between 1501 and 1867 it is estimated that nearly 13 million African men, women and children were abducted from their homes and forced into slavery.[1] Regrettably, around 2 million of the kidnapped and enslaved perished during the torturous voyage across the Atlantic, what is now known as the 'Middle Passage'.[2] And while slavery has been a fact of human existence for millennia, Britain's crucial role in the transatlantic slave trade over centuries is something that many of us were barely taught about in schools.

As European countries sought to expand and colonise the world in the early modern period, the transatlantic slave trade expanded with them, as demand rose for labour in the new territories of the Americas. The Portuguese were the first to ship enslaved Africans to work in Europe, from the early 1440s.[3] The Portuguese initially traded with African merchants and kings for enslaved people. Instead of performing the kidnapping themselves, the Portuguese encouraged African leaders to supply enslaved people as a trade commodity, in the same way they would supply goods such as ivory and gold.

In Africa, slavery had existed for centuries before Europeans arrived. Slavery was a recognised institution within African societies, and one could be enslaved for a number of reasons: as punishment for a crime, as a prisoner of war, or simply for being an outsider in the wrong place. There were also occasions where people would sell themselves into slavery or servitude to

pay off outstanding debts.[4] Unlike the slave trade that Europe and America engaged in across the Atlantic, this earlier form of slavery was not simply based on race. Anyone could be enslaved, and the practice was very much part of economic structures, with established networks of slave trading that transported people to regions like the Middle East and, in earlier times, the Roman Empire. African societies were initially enticed by trade with Portugal for access to European goods such as guns, alcohol, textiles and metalware. Access to these goods made slave societies rich, enhancing their economies and strengthening their militaries while simultaneously gaining the wealth and prestige that made the trade so attractive to Europe's elite.

In 1492, under the guidance of the Spanish Crown, Christopher Columbus was credited with 'discovering' the Americas.[5] He made his first voyage across the Atlantic and landed in the Bahamas, specifically on an island he named San Salvador on 12 October 1492.[6] This event marked the start of European expansion and the colonisation of the Americas. Initially, European powers, led by Spain and Portugal, sought to enslave local indigenous communities to meet their demand for labour, but the colonisers brought new diseases to which the indigenous people had no natural immunity and, in a matter of decades, a combination of disease, warfare and the migration of indigenous people away from the east coast left the European colonisers in need of a new workforce. As a result, they turned to African slave societies to supply labour for their plantations and mines, believing that darker-skinned people were more suited to working long hours in hotter climates.[7] The first enslaved Africans were brought to the Americas not long after Columbus's voyages, and demand for enslaved workers grew with the advent of plantations and the profitable cash crops they produced.

Britain's involvement began in the 1560s, as English

merchants traded enslaved Africans captured on the west coast of Africa with the Spanish Americas.[8] Sir John Hawkins was an English naval commander and the first known British slave trader, and he played a pivotal role in bringing England into the transatlantic slave trade.[9] Hawkins's voyages to the west coast of Africa to capture and trade enslaved Africans were supported by Queen Elizabeth I, who provided him with ships and guns for his expeditions. Once England began to establish colonies in the New World the country's participation in the slave trade expanded significantly. The first successful English colony was Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, and the English had settled in St Christopher (now known as St Kitts) by 1624 and in Barbados by 1627.[10]

By the 1700s, after the acts of union that joined England (together with Wales) and Scotland into the Kingdom of Great Britain, the British had established a significant number of colonies in the New World, including an unbroken strip of land along America's east coast that stretched from Maine down to South Carolina. These colonies helped Britain become a major player in the 'Triangular Trade', which saw merchants ship manufactured goods from Britain to the west coast of Africa to be traded for enslaved Africans and African goods, which were then sailed along the Middle Passage to the Americas to be sold to European plantation owners. They returned from the Americas to Britain loaded with commodities produced on the plantations, which were then sold for more manufactured goods – beginning the cycle once more.

Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavas Vassa, was born around 1745. He was kidnapped as a child in West Africa and eventually sold into slavery. Equiano was forced to travel the Middle Passage, and his first-person account of it has been integral to our understanding.[11] In 1766, Equiano was able to buy his freedom for between forty and seventy pounds, and he

then made his way to Britain where he became a prominent abolitionist.[12] He wrote about his experiences in his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano*, which was published in 1789 and detailed the horror of the Middle Passage:

> I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life; so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me.[13]

Many of the enslaved would become sick from the cramped, stuffed conditions of travelling the eighty-odd days in the ship's hold, body to body, stacked as you would an overfilled suitcase, trying to fit as much as possible into the space. It's estimated that between 12 to 15 per cent of enslaved people would die on each leg of the Middle Passage voyage.

The legacy of slavery continues to have a significant impact on the Caribbean. On many of the islands, sugar was the dominant cash crop for centuries, and through its production European owners and traders were able to generate life-changing amounts of wealth. For a time, the Caribbean plantations and colonies were more lucrative than those on mainland America. Slavery, and the diseases that colonisers brought, permanently altered the demographics of the Caribbean, with indigenous people being all but wiped out during the initial waves of exploration. By the eighteenth century, enslaved Africans and their descendants had become the majority population on many Caribbean islands.[14]

The transatlantic slave system also introduced a hierarchical system where those with lighter skin were seen to be in

closer proximity to whiteness. Being white put you at the top of the scale – white people were always the owners, overseers and in positions of power over Black people, even if they themselves were poor. Those with lighter skin had more chance of gaining a position within the house, whereas the darker-skinned were virtually guaranteed to be doing the most physically punishing jobs outside. This colourism persists today within the Caribbean, and across the Black diaspora globally.

In Africa, the displacement of nearly 13 million Africans forced into slavery had a devastating effect on the millions more back home.[15] Families were torn apart, and whole societies were disrupted. The demand for enslaved labour, which grew as Europe expanded in the Americas, led many African leaders to engage in wars and raids to capture their own people to sell to European traders. These betrayals weakened political structures and bred distrust among those in power. While there were some African leaders and merchants who profited from the trade, the overall economic impact of slavery on Africa was devastating. As the slave trade became an ever more profitable business, local industries and agriculture suffered and declined. The removal of significant numbers of the young and able also reduced the number of people left behind who could lead and innovate. The story of the slave trade is so vast, and affected so many places and people around the world, that we have to ask: why don't we hear more about it in classrooms and the media?

This book was inspired by a podcast, also called *Human Resources*. We wanted to create an accessible entry point into this history, and we thought the best way would be to show people the links between their own lives and the (not so) distant past. So we took modern (or familiar) people, items and companies and explored their direct – or indirect – links to the slave trade. We soon discovered that, far from being a closed

historical chapter, the slave trade continues to shape our lives: from the food we eat to the clothes we wear; from the way our workplaces are structured to the financial products we use; from the statues we put up in our towns and museums to the gyms and holiday resorts of our leisure time, the transatlantic slave trade is completely enmeshed with modern life.

However, it still often seems that the subject of slavery is regarded as a Black issue. You can anticipate the familiar eye roll when Britain's history of slavery is brought up – and those of us who are descendants of slaves are often made to feel as if it's something we should just move on from and forget. It's not a history we tell, or which is taught, in any detail in school; knowledge is either assumed or you must seek it out yourself. The nuances of this history are rarely explored in a way that considers the narratives of the enslaved themselves, as opposed to those who bought, sold and exploited them. It's also a history that is completely divorced from the lives we currently live. This separation comes from the difficulty in acknowledging that many of us now benefit from systems developed within the slave trade – and that slavery still exists today.

Why is this, then? Two things we noticed during our research might provide part of the answer.

There is a lack of Black British historians in the formal academic world, especially among experts in this field, although there have been some positive developments in recent years. Systemic problems in education and academia have a lot to answer for. Black children, particularly those of Caribbean heritage, often find themselves punished and discouraged – and eventually written off – for even minor acts of misconduct such as talking in class, when their white counterparts are given opportunity after opportunity to turn around bad behaviour. An exclusive analysis by the *Guardian* found 'exclusion rates for Black Caribbean students in English schools are

up to six times higher than those of their white peers in some local authorities'.[16] A report into the underachievement of Black Caribbean students in English schools found that poor leadership on equality issues, a low expectation of Black students and a lack of a diverse workforce were just some of the factors that contributed to poor outcomes for Black Caribbean students.[17] We can't ignore the fact that Black Caribbean children in the UK may be disconnected from their history, which is why we believe that this book is important as an entry point to the complexities of the past. Systemic biases that see Black students excluded from lessons where they might learn more about their past, and that doubtlessly contribute to fewer of them entering higher education, have certainly played a big part in preventing more of us from knowing about the legacy of slavery. Following the shocking case of 'Child Q', a Black child who was strip-searched by police at a Hackney secondary school in 2020, the Children's Commissioner released a report that found 'Black children are now four times more likely to be strip-searched compared to the national population figures'.[18] Statistics like these recall the stereotypes used to justify slavery and racial inequality, and the fact that, in the eyes of the authorities, Black people are somehow more violent and less trustworthy than the white population.

For Arisa, being a British Indian historian of race, empire and migration is political, and stakes a claim on a subject that people like her were told was not for them. But the aim of this book is not the uncovering of contentious information. Rather, it hopes to enrich the story of Britain, bringing the whole country, including Scotland, Wales and the North of England, as well as Ireland, into the narrative of how the modern UK was made. The podcast gave us a chance to work with scholars who are women, people of colour and early career researchers from Britain and the US, but also, importantly, from Africa

and the Caribbean. A focus of the project was also to speak to community workers, activists and local historians, to diversify the types of historical research typically considered reliable and valid. It has been an honour to highlight such new and innovative research and the fresh stories uncovered by all the incredible people involved.

The other thing we noticed was a squeamishness around how organisations describe their links with the trade, if they disclose them at all. An imaginary border seems to have been established, between indirect and direct involvement in slavery. A direct link would mean that a company or organisation actually owned enslaved people, whereas an indirect one would involve more general financial entanglement – trading merchandise that was produced on plantations, for example. This is frustrating, because it suggests that profiting from slavery at one remove is somehow more acceptable than, say, owning a plantation, and because it seems to gloss over one of the most important reasons why Europe grew vastly richer and more developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – its trade in human beings. In fact, slavery was so fundamental to the way British society then worked that, in many cases, it simply wasn't possible to separate yourself from it. From factory workers in remote Scottish villages to the politicians, scientists and religious leaders of the time, everyone was involved (and often benefited) in one way or another from slavery. An analogy might be the internet today: you might not work for Apple, Meta or Google, but you wouldn't be able to get through your day without using their services, and they make life easier, simpler and cheaper than if you were to cut them out entirely. It's all too easy to ignore the hidden costs of modern life to the environment, to global democracy, or simply to the person who made your smartphone or mined the minerals in your laptop. We have no idea what our luxuries rely on, just as those during

slavery pleaded ignorance to the realities of what happened on plantations.

Leaving aside distinctions between direct and indirect involvement, however, we can understand why many people today feel more comfortable speaking about their connections to the trade as long as they are situated firmly in the past. It's a history that no one wants to be associated with – but it's one that we have to reckon with. We need to find a way to deal with the discomfort, so that we can truly understand what these traumatic histories represent, and perhaps then begin to dismantle their toxic legacies in the modern day. If we do not, we continue the harm to those whose lives the slave trade destroyed, and we fail to recognise the true consequences of this history for present-day Britain. We are not here to reprimand or condemn companies for their pasts. We're here to reveal our shared history so that we can properly understand our present and future.

In 1807, the British government passed the Slave Trade Act, which began the process of ending slavery, though the use of indentured Indian and South-east Asian servitude continued long after slavery was eventually abolished. While the 1807 law did have some impact on British merchants' ability to bring newly kidnapped Africans into enslavement, it didn't stop them from being able to trade enslaved people among other European colonies across the Caribbean, and it didn't free enslaved people or forced labourers working on plantations. Emancipation did not come until the passing of the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act, which came into force in 1834. This Act banned slavery across the British Empire and made enslaved people 'free'. The British government was only able to pass the Act by promising to pay a combined sum of £20 million as compensation – not to the enslaved people but to their 'owners'

for the loss of income. Abolitionists also had to lobby hard to convince slave owners and politicians that other commercial opportunities existed that could bring in as much money as enslaved labour.

Although many humanitarians and religious groups such as the Quakers were firm campaigners against slavery, the idea that the British state championed abolition as a positive, humanitarian cause obscures the fact that by the 1800s slavery was already losing its lustre for investors and traders.[19] The speed and efficiency of mechanised labour in the Industrial Revolution meant that forced labour was no longer the most efficient way to run plantations. Many plantations had already exhausted their fertile land, which was needed to grow crops like sugar and tobacco.[20] Newer plantations in other European colonies were also beginning to supply UK sugar refineries and tobacco plants, which added to the pressure on existing plantation owners.[21]

Abolition was far from a 'full stop' to slavery, though it is sometimes presented as such. As a crucial part of Britain's economic development, it has left a long shadow across the modern nation. To take just two examples, we still use scientific principles today developed during the era of transatlantic slavery that would have been impossible to establish without the global networks that it maintained. We still use medical procedures based on experiments carried out on non-consenting enslaved women. We cannot, as Professor Kathleen S. Murphy of California's Polytechnic University says, just 'throw it out'.[22] We have to find a way to honour and acknowledge those whose bodies were made use of in order to secure these advancements, and to show how enslaved people contributed in myriad ways to the advances that have made our modern lives possible. Their labour, knowledge and creativity, and their bodies, are all part of the story; a story that has been, until

now, mostly hidden or folded into that of the 'great white men' who get most of the credit.

Working on this book, Renay definitely had moments of realisation that have helped her understand why certain things within her Jamaican and Trinidadian heritage were normalised. Why Caribbean people favour European names, for example, which was a way for enslaved people in the Caribbean to distance themselves from their enslaved pasts upon emancipation, and why wedding and funeral traditions in her communities are embedded in European Christian traditions rather than African ones – a legacy of cultural erasure and forced assimilation. There remains, as we will see, a clear divide in Caribbean culture between those who acknowledge African origins and those who historically favoured assimilation into European culture.

This is by no means an exhaustive history of the exploitation of enslaved Africans within the transatlantic slave trade, but it is a starting point, linking modern Britain with its foundational past, and casting light on our society today. We hope that this book helps more people to question what they were taught at school. As we travel through history, we can link the past to contemporary questions around race, equity, climate and justice. We are constantly dealing with the same problems in new forms. Injustices are often not overcome, but simply reshaped into different, if perhaps less overt, injustices, a fact that becomes clearer the deeper you dive into the histories of empire and slavery.

We hope that adults and children alike will read the stories we've put together and will feel a sense of peace, closure and belonging. And we hope, too, that everyone will walk away with a better understanding of how history has empowered some and disempowered others, as well as a new appreciation for the importance of history in understanding ourselves.

1

Accounting

However brutal slavery was, however much enslavers tried to justify their actions through a perceived racial hierarchy, the slave trade was always, at its heart, about profit. It turned individual human beings, each with a unique and personal experience of the world, into entries in a ledger book, examples of profit and loss – literal human resources. As historian Trevor Bernard put it, 'they commodified everything, including people'.[1] He is, of course, talking about how capitalism evolved over time. And while slavery was eventually abolished in the British empire, the conceptual links established between the commodification of humans in this way and in our own society still exist, especially in our businesses and workplaces.

So, is the accountancy we all rely on today rooted in practices that were developed during the shameful era of enslavement? And, if the answer is yes, does this mean that those of us who engage in management and profit-making have inadvertently developed the same viewpoint as a plantation owner? We might instinctively feel that the answer is no, that there's a huge difference between modern working practices – however unpleasant and impersonal – and the violence and exploitation of plantation slavery. But if the value we place on people, and the way we measure their worth, is based on processes developed during

the transatlantic slave trade, then the answer may not be that simple.

I spoke to Caitlin Rosenthal, a historian and author of *Accounting for Slavery*, who explained that accounting practices were essential for keeping the entire infrastructure of slavery running smoothly, as well as a way for enslavers to mentally separate themselves from the realities of their work. Accountancy, she said, was what made 'all of these long-distance and financial relationships work.'[2] Reducing the image of enslaved people toiling on a plantation to a profit and loss column, Rosenthal argues, 'let people, from a distance, not have to deal with the moral repugnance of slavery, [while still] funding it and profiting from it at the same time'.[3]

To take Jamaica and Barbados as two examples, many of the plantations there were owned by absentee enslavers, who ran the plantation business from Britain and transferred their Caribbean profits abroad. Overseers on the plantations sent monthly reports to the owners in Britain, tallying the number of slaves they had working, what these individuals generated in labour and ultimately how much profit they were making. If it was a cotton plantation, how many bags of cotton have been packed for export? How many slaves were bought or traded each month? How many were sick, unable to work, or had died or been born? The bureaucracy may have obscured the reality of life on a plantation, but, looking at these inventories today, it's impossible to ignore the barbarity inflicted upon enslaved people, and how their humanity had been stolen from them.

Detailed records were essential for absentee owners. Labour logs were common, detailing the tasks that individuals performed and the amount of goods produced, as well as the health of enslaved people and the total number of workers. An example of this record-keeping can be taken from 'Daily Record of cotton picking' taken from Thomas Affleck's 'Cotton

Plantation record and Account Book'.[4] Thomas Affleck was a planter, writer and agricultural reformer, originally from Scotland, who had moved to the southern states of America in the early 1800s. Affleck soon became a significant figure in banking, and had associations with the South Sea Company and the management of the Queen Anne's Bounty trust (see chapter 4, 'The Church of England').[5] Here's an example from the 'daily record of cotton picked', this one from the week commencing 28 October 1861 (errors from the original manuscript are reproduced here):[6]

TABLE 1

Name	No.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Week
Lewis	41	255	245	265	266		270	1296
Tad	42	56	45	66	60		67	288
Levy	43	105	100	115	105		100	526

From this table, we can infer that Lewis was an adult man, Tad the youngest child, and Levy slightly older, but also a child. All three were likely beholden to their quotas, and records like these functioned as a kind of surveillance – carefully monitoring their productivity and ensuring that any inability to meet targets could be addressed by overseers.

Another accounting practice common on plantations was valuations. Plantation owners developed various ways to calculate the value of enslaved people, who were not only regarded as plantation labourers but also as capital assets that could be bought or sold, taking into account appreciation and depreciation. Children were valued according to age, with their value rising annually. When an enslaved person reached their peak efficiency as a worker, their value would then depreciate each year.

Seeing babies listed on property valuations as 'unnamed infants' is hard to forget, and we might struggle to understand

how the enslaved were viewed by people for whom the birth of a baby was a financial event. But that is to look at those lists from a modern perspective. For an absentee owner, someone who was tallying up their finances, it may have been easier to see everything in the abstract, in a simple spreadsheet. They might have seen 'unnamed infant' as a bonus, an asset that would grow in value with each passing year.

Caitlin Rosenthal told me that while it's hard to trace the specific origins of accounting, there are features of plantation slavery that accelerated its development as a business practice. In labour terms, plantations were some of the largest organisations in Britain and its colonies in the early 1700s, with the biggest workforces and operations. During this period, while British factories tended to be larger, most factories were reliant on sub-contractors, whereas plantations had direct responsibility for hundreds of workers. The sheer scale of slavery, along with the slave owners' ability to control their workers, made it especially easy to, in Rosenthal's words, 'treat people as if they were just an input to production'.[7]

The complex management structures that slave owners developed to oversee their operations required detailed record-keeping in order to monitor productivity and output, a practice that is used throughout modern business management today. The amount of work an enslaved person could perform during a set window was calculated so as to push them to their maximum output. Standardised records were also trialled in plantation society, with overseers using preprinted forms to execute record-keeping across multiple plantations.

According to Rosenthal, when we think about slavery as a kind of unfree labour, it's easy to reduce our understanding of what it means to be a slave to a condition of 'not being paid'. For Rosenthal, 'the more important dimension to me is people not being able to quit'.[8] Being enslaved was physical, and just

as often included sexual abuse as it did mental degradation. It was the erasure of culture, individuality and autonomy. It's an example of the complete degradation of an entire race. But how does this relate to modern working?

Rosenthal points to undocumented workers, especially in the US. 'I think some businesses prefer to have undocumented workers because it gives them a lot of power and it gives them the ability to be coercive in a way that they couldn't be otherwise.'[9] In 2014, 22 per cent of undocumented workers in the United States worked in private residences.[10] The majority of these workers were female, and reported not only unregulated pay but physical and sexual abuse including rape, and frequently being forced to work twelve-hour days with little to no breaks and no paid overtime.[11] The abuse of undocumented workers is, sadly, not uncommon, but people are reluctant to report their experiences due to a fear of deportation. This is just another way in which these workers can be exploited, treated badly, and coerced into staying in an environment.

Thinking of slavery in this way, as a condition where people are unable to quit or say no to their bosses, makes it easier to understand its toxic legacy in the modern world of work. There are many people in jobs they feel cannot leave, and countless reasons why they might feel trapped. The cost of living crisis, economic downturns, interest rate hikes – all these things can lead to a feeling of insecurity and to holding out in a negative environment for fear of unemployment.

There are so many ways that accounting and slavery are intertwined, from the meticulous scrutiny of workers' productivity to the exploitation of undocumented workers. Taking humanity out of any decision-making process is likely to create inhumane standards – whether that's employment prospects or credit scores being determined by algorithms, or slave owners treating newborn infants like assets awaiting maturity. We are

still grappling with the legacy of slavery and the toxic forms of accountability in the workplace that it gave rise to. With the rise of corporate capitalism, these links seem only more entrenched.

But the detailed records and accounts kept by slave plantations do have one benefit – for historians. In them, we can find what Rosenthal calls 'the stories that we don't have the sources for', the traces of lives that would otherwise have entirely disappeared. When we look at the 'inventory of people' that a slave owner produced, historians can often use them to find living descendants today and connect them with their lost ancestry. Although she allowed that 'it's a trickier genealogical task than for a free white person', Rosenthal assured us that 'it's doable in many cases'.[12]

For decades race inequality in the workplace, in workers' incomes and in generational wealth has been laid at the feet of Black people who, it is insinuated, don't or can't work as hard as their white counterparts. But in these account books and balance sheets lies a different story – one that connects the plantations of the past with the workplaces of the present day. If you look beyond the violence and past the numbers, you begin to see the infrastructure that benefited those in power, and helps keep them there today.

RR

2

Gunpowder

All of us 'remember, remember the fifth of November, gunpowder treason and plot'. Guy Fawkes (1570–1606), centuries-long enemy of our nation, the man burned at the stake in gardens and parks up and down the country every year on Bonfire Night, hatched a plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament and kill the king using thirty-six kegs of gunpowder in 1605. In punishment, he was sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered, executed for his betrayal of the state. This is one of the earliest stories drummed into us all at school, but have you ever learned of the deeper, darker history of Guy Fawkes's weapon, the gunpowder itself?

I spoke to the historian of Atlantic slavery, Nicholas Radburn at the University of Lancaster, who has researched its entanglements with the history of gunpower, and he explained how gunpowder technology originating in China in 800 AD spread to India, eventually making its way to Europe from Bihar in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Later, it was taken on to the Americas, where it was used by both Europeans and the indigenous people. But its largest market was the coast of West Africa, where it was sold in exchange for slaves.[1] Made up of saltpetre, charcoal and sulphur ground together into a fine-grained powder, gunpowder was then dried out in dedicated

rooms, and shovelled into barrels to be exported and sold.[2] Before the growth of the African markets due to slave trading, the British gunpowder industry had been entirely located in London, with mills established since the Tudor and Stuart periods. It was sold domestically in small amounts for hunting and mining, but, ultimately, these privately owned mills were, in Radburn's phrase, 'a key weapon of the state, for the state is a voracious consumer of ammunition for its armies'.[3]

The Royal African Company obtained its gunpowder from these London mills in 1700, some of which were financed by the East India Company.[4] The mills supplied both the slave trade and a variety of other buyers, but the growth of the slave trade, firstly in Bristol and then in Liverpool, created fresh opportunities, and new mills were built in the surrounding countryside from the 1720s onwards to supply these ports more efficiently.[5] British merchant capitalists then established gunpowder plants to meet African demand. These mills, as Radburn elaborates, 'were established specifically to supply the slave trade, by slave traders themselves'. Radburn's research, conducted close to the major slaving ports, was on two mills near Bristol, one near Liverpool on the Mersey River, and two near Lancaster. He points out that, because of a need for running water, and their tendency to blow up, the mills tended to be in 'very obscure rural places' that were not, 'by any stretch of the imagination, the sort of locations that you would think would be politically plugged into a place like Liverpool, and then, by extension, to Africa'.[6] So this is also a story about the British countryside, and emerging rural–urban flows of people, goods and money.[7]

Gunpowder plants were expensive and required huge numbers of people from different industries to build, thus creating jobs. The capital to fund these mills came from investments from two sources: local merchant-capitalists, and slave

traders.[8] Almost all mill owners were somehow involved in the slave trade, either as owners of slave ships or connected through business or family to the slave economy. Radburn's research showed that, of 'the two main branches of slavery, outfitting slave ships or selling people in the Americas, gunpowder [accounts for] about 10 per cent' of the profits. It doesn't sound like much, but it was enough to make those who invested very rich men – in fact, manufacturing gunpowder could be more profitable than investing in the slave ships themselves. This points to an interesting insight: that a lot of the money made from the slave trade did not come directly from the ships or from owning slaves, but from manufacturing goods for the slave trade. None of this, Radburn says, was accidental. 'Their whole reason for being was supplying the slave trade. That's why they were there, that's how they survived.'[9] We can see legacies of this wealth all round us – in the banks set up by mill owners that later helped to finance northern industry, and in the landscape in villages like Sedgwick that grew close to the works that supplied workers. These villages attribute their histories to gunpowder, but never to the slave trade. Vast country homes and estates, such as Sedgwick House in Cumbria (which later became a school and has now been converted into apartments), were also built from these profits, and still punctuate our countryside vistas, making their mark.[10]

Britain was locked into constant warfare between 1688 and 1815, both in Europe (particularly in France) and in the colonies. War was the backdrop to the Industrial Revolution, and the state was heavily reliant on a weapons industry and arsenal to ensure the survival of the kingdom.[11] Africa was without a doubt the largest export market for gunpowder before abolition in 1808, dwarfing demand in Flanders, Holland, Italy, Portugal, the thirteen American colonies, Canada and India. Between 1772 and 1808, 62 per cent of gunpowder exports

went to Atlantic Africa, three times the quantity shipped to the Americas.[12] By the time of the abolition of the slave trade, Britain would have supplied approximately 200,000 weapons to Africa, every single year. The provincial British gunpowder mills developed specialist products, variously named 'Africa', 'Guinea' or 'Trade' powder, specifically for the African market, and which suited the climate and conditions there better than other compounds: durable, reliable and cheap.[13]

Guns were adopted willingly at first on the African continent for use in hunting, and were carried by bandits, warlords, kidnappers, merchants and caravans.[14] They were status symbols, representing prestige and masculinity from the very beginning, and were valuable and lucrative commodities for trading.[15] But the result of injecting mechanised weaponry into African society was devastating. Communities began using them as self-defence against both European slave traders and other African tribes and villages, who may have attempted to wage war or steal their villagers to sell as slaves. A vicious cycle emerged, in which West Africans needed guns to prevent their village members from being captured and sold, but to buy guns they needed to sell slaves. Villages were constantly violently preying on and attacking one another to steal human beings. Much blood was shed, and some kingdoms and city-states were decimated as a result. Others, like the Asante and Dahomey, grew rich and powerful. Dahomey (now Benin), which emerged around 1600, had, like many African kingdoms, a long history of slave-raiding and slavery, but it was the far larger and more professional system of transatlantic slavery that actually propelled Dahomey to vast wealth, creating an influential, centralised militaristic society from 1720 onwards. Raiding for slaves became a way of life that was key to the functioning of the kingdom. Ensuing rivalries, tensions and constant war prevented political stability. Historians and

social scientists believe ethnic division that continues to this day almost certainly has its roots in this period.[16]

Holding people at gunpoint naturally made capturing and rounding up slaves more efficient and productive. At the same time, as the numbers of enslaved people sold from Africa grew, the more Europeans went there, thinking it to be a lucrative market, and the more guns were sold in exchange. Higher numbers of guns seemed to correlate with an acceleration in slave trading. This created a self-perpetuating *gun–slave cycle*, which all parties became entangled in.[17] If you track the financial records, the prices of gunpowder and cargo slaves go up and down in tandem.[18]

Historians have found significant evidence that the gun–slave cycle, and the slave trade at large, has had long-term negative consequences for West Africa.[19] There are numerous studies that evidence a clear negative relationship between areas that experienced high rates of population depletion and violence as their people were kidnapped and sold into slavery, with their social and economic outcomes in contrast to other parts of Africa, even today, centuries later.[20] On the whole, it seems that the exchange of guns for slaves was not a planned strategy to impoverish the continent. It was the result of centuries of participation in the trade and the hunger for profit on all sides. African societies were both complicit and fierce resisters of the system, in equal measure. As the trade eclipsed every other crop, commodity and industry in value, however, it became all-consuming. Those who did not join in would surely become impoverished: take or be taken. With an entire economic system built on the sale of human flesh, it is less a question of complicity than of need and survival, of ordinary people and everyday lives turning as small cogs in an epic system.[21]

But what happened when the 1833 abolition of slavery

ended the gun–slave cycle? There were few other places where gunpowder was so in demand as West Africa.[22] Initially, the mills pivoted towards miners – who needed it to blast out mines – or integrated themselves within a more global powder-making industry, finding new markets that would ensure their continuance through Britain's Industrial Revolution.[23] However, Radburn says that the biggest development was the continued viability of gunpowder as a currency for trade in Africa, but now, rather than people, it was exchanged for palm oil, which was used for soaps, candles and industrial lubricants. By the late 1830s, palm oil products were flooding Liverpool, and Radburn estimates that northern powder mills were actually providing more gunpowder to Liverpool than they did before abolition.[24]

Empire, slavery, violence and war all helped to catalyse the Industrial Revolution, and have therefore been fundamental to Britain's economic development and increased power. Yet we do not acknowledge them often and strongly enough as part of our country's legacy.[25] Radburn's important research is a demonstration of this: an ordinary-looking grey powder played a hand in shaping history, in state formation, conquests, slavery, mining, industrialisation and more.[26] He is certain that there is still much more to understand about the relationship between the British arms industry and the transatlantic slave trade, as well as important questions about how British businesses, merchants and manufacturers supplied and expanded the slave trade, and made fortunes that were poured back into this country's infrastructure in return. 'Such work', he tells me, 'is essential, if Britain is to fully reckon with the modern legacies of its slave-trading past.'[27]

Gunpowder is nowadays used primarily for celebrations on happy occasions, when we set off fireworks and write in the sky with sparklers on Bonfire Night, New Year's Eve and Diwali,

at weddings and birthdays. Hearing this deeper, darker, vaster story from Radburn is uncomfortable and unsettling. I began to wonder why the story about gunpowder we know best is that of the Gunpowder Plot, where the gunpowder was never even put to use. Why have we barely heard the full story about how, and for what purposes, this country used gunpowder, and the impacts that reverberated around the world as a result? It seems to me that rather than Guy Fawkes, it's the gun–slave cycle that might be Britain's true Gunpowder Plot.

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The British Monarchy

It was during a visit to Jamaica in 2022 that Prince William said: 'Slavery was abhorrent and it never should have happened … I strongly agree with my father, the Prince of Wales, who said in Barbados last year that the appalling atrocity of slavery forever stains our history.'[1]

Before William visited Jamaica, which is part of the British Commonwealth, activists had demanded an apology from the royal family for their involvement in the slave trade. Tellingly, William's statement did not contain an apology – and it doesn't seem like one is likely to come soon. All prominent members of the British royal family managed to sail through the 2020 racial reckonings without addressing or even acknowledging their family's role, not only in transatlantic slavery, but as the figureheads of an empire that left a bitter legacy of inequality in its former colonies across the Commonwealth.

The royal family have a mixed effect on people. Some of us love them, even in former colony countries like Jamaica. My grandmother, for example, had Charles and Diana's wedding photos on her wall as though they were members of our family, and my aunt seems to have only good things to say about them. And then there are the countless people who lined Pall Mall and the route of the royal procession to watch King Charles's