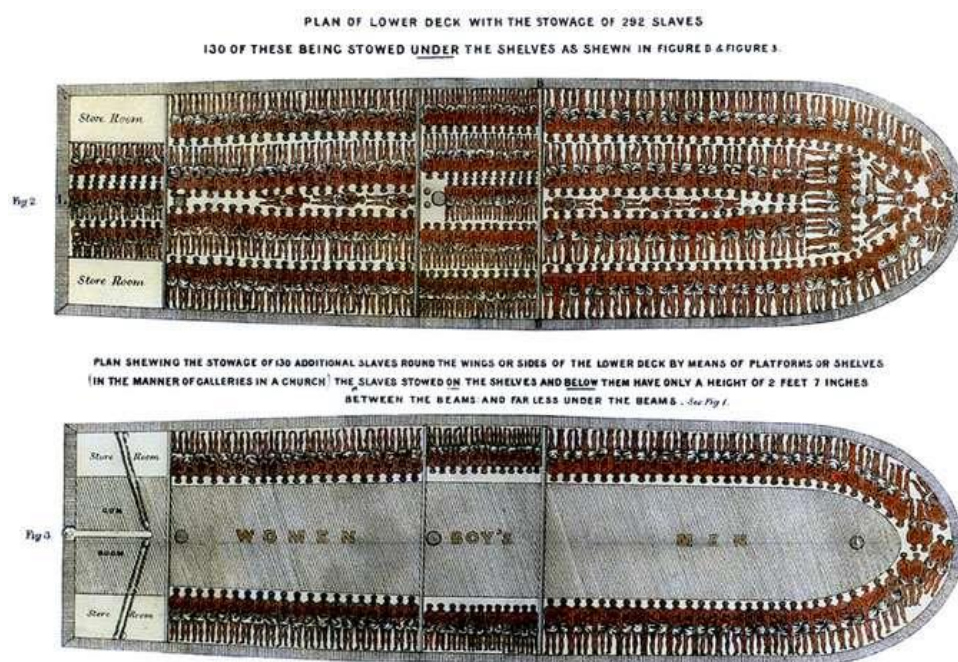


Samuel Whitbread and our Colonial past: The family and its links to slavery and abolition

The Black Lives Matter movement is promoting a number of key aims, one of those is to educate people about the British colonial past. The economic success of our country during the 17th and 18th centuries (and into the early 19th Century), that revered period of the industrial revolution and empire building, was based on a system where those we colonised were treated unfairly, to the point where their humanity was lost. Here I particularly refer to the benefits that Britain accrued from the slave trade and the use of slave labour in its colonies in the Caribbean and what is now the United States. This colonial past, and the inextricable link between slavery and British financial success, is something that is often not realised or understood. Many of our ideas of race and what it means are linked to these developments that many may not be completely aware of.

Many British families benefited from the slave trade and from slavery, not just those who held a title, but also the middle classes who loaned their slaves to plantations as work gangs.¹ Yet in the late 1700s Britain underwent a transformation as a period of political and social reform started, with the French Revolution, industrialisation and accelerating urbanisation as its backdrop. In 1791-2 Thomas Paine's 'Rights of Man' was published, which embraced the view that every individual possesses inalienable natural rights. The fact that Britain at this time had a leading role in the slave trade, pricked the conscience of some, and led to the development of an anti-slavery movement.² This is where Samuel Whitbread and his family become important. Samuel Whitbread (1720-1796) was born in Cardington near Bedford, and after amassing a considerable fortune in the brewing industry became a politician. In 1768 he became the MP for Bedford.³ This is where his life story becomes very relevant to the history of slavery. Samuel Whitbread was an abolitionist – he fought with others to end the slave trade and end this horrific form of labour. There is a number of primary sources available that highlight Samuel Whitbread's role in ending the slave trade, his abhorrence of the condition's slaves faced, and how he was one of a group of key abolitionists in parliament who made a difference.



Samuel Whitbread supported and helped to pass the Dolben Act of 1833 which highlighted the conditions that slaves were subjected to on the ships that took them from Africa to the plantations.

⁴Documents show that Samuel Whitbread was key to calling attention in the House of Commons to the plight of slaves. His daughter, Harriet Gordons', reminiscences state 'I must tell you he really was the first man, who mentioned the Slave Trade in the House of Commons and called Mr Pitt's [the Prime Minister's]

attention to it'.⁵ In 1788 William Dolben described the horrors on the slave trading ships, referring to slaves chained hand and foot, packed in like herrings in a barrel' and suffering from 'putrid and fatal disorders' (see image above).

¹ David Olusoga 'The history of British slave ownership has been buried: now its scale can be revealed' *The Observer* (12 Jul 2015 00.04 BST Last modified on Wed 1 Jul 2020 18.12 BST) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/12/british-history-slavery-buried-scale-revealed> (Last accessed: 2/7/20) The middle class who 'possessed no land in the Caribbean and rented their slaves out to landowners, in work gangs. These bit-players were home county vicars, iron manufacturers from the Midlands and lots and lots of widows. About 40% of the slave owners living in the colonies were women. Then, as now, women tended to outlive their husbands and simply inherited human property through their partner's wills.'

² https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/struggle_democracy/making_history_democracy.htm (Last accessed 2/7/20)

³ Peter Mathias Whitbread, Samuel (1720–1796) <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-39057> (Last accessed: 29/6/20)

⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade> (Last accessed: 27/6/20)

⁵ Bedfordshire and the Slave Trade - Slavery and the Slave Trade: The evidence in the archives <http://bedsarchives.bedford.gov.uk/Newsletters/BedfordshireandtheSlaveTrade.aspx> (Last accessed: 27/6/20)

With the help of the famous abolitionist William Wilberforce, William Pitt, Charles Middleton, William Smith, and Samuel Whitbread, Dolben put forward a bill in parliament to regulate conditions on the slave ships, which passed through Parliament 56 to 5, gaining royal assent on 11th July 1788.⁶ This Act restricted the number of slaves that a ship could carry based on its weight in tons. It was believed that fewer slaves being carried, would improve the conditions of those on board.⁷ At this time we also see that that a Samuel Whitbread MP is listed as a member of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade.⁸ Clearly showing his involvement in the longer term aim of ending slavery (see image below).

The abolitionist mantle then passed from father to son, with the MP Samuel Whitbread II (1764-1815) continuing the political fight against the slave trade, and for the abolition of slavery. Samuel Whitbread II's portrait is at the National Portrait Gallery, he is described as 'A reformer, he championed religious and civil rights, the abolition of slavery and a national education system'.⁹ His fight to abolish the slave trade can be found in parliamentary documentation from the time. His speeches on the need for the abolition of slavery are recorded in Hansard, for example, his speech of 27th February 1807 which he made in support of the abolitionist William Wilberforce by highlighting the horrendous experience of slaves to Parliament.¹⁰ In the History of Parliament he is recorded as having supported abolition, speaking out further against the slave trade on 18th April 1791 and 2nd April 1792.¹¹

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Both Samuel Whitbread and his son should be lauded for their role in getting a law passed abolishing the slave trade in 1807 and the official end of the British slave system with the Abolition Act of 1833. This acknowledgement of their success, goes with recognition of the work of not just white abolitionists, like the Whitbreads, but also of the role black and white men and women, slave and free, in the fight to get this Act in front of Parliament and passed.¹²

The story of the Whitbread family does however have an interesting twist to it which is representative of the experiences of many families at the time. The numbers of people that benefited from the slave trade make it likely that a close relative would benefit from a system that these men were trying to get rid of. In 2009 UCL set up a project to examine how the legacy of slavery had helped shape modern Britain by documenting who had benefited from slavery.¹³ One way they were able to do this was due to an element of the Abolition Act that is not something to boast about. The 1833 Act may have abolished slavery, but it also offered compensation to slave owners for the loss of their slaves. From the list of those compensated, and by how much, that was created by the government the UCL database was able to see exactly who received this money. One such person was an apprentice at Whitbread's and highlights how so many British people were beneficiaries of this slave system.

'The history of Greene King gives a glimpse into some of these entanglements. Benjamin Greene started off as an apprentice to the leading brewing firm Whitbread in London, and would go on to inherit estates in the island of St Kitts, becoming one of many absentee slave owners living off their Caribbean property. Once emancipation happened he was one of the 4,000 people in Britain (20% of whom were women) who

⁶ <https://Spartacus-educational.com/BUwhitbread.htm> (Last accessed: 27/6/20)

⁷ <http://www.discoveringbristol.org.uk/slavery/against-slavery/campaign-against-slave-trade/legal-framework/legislation/#:~:text=In%201788%2C%20the%20Dolben%20Act,to%20its%20weight%20in%20tons.> (Last accessed: 27/7/20)

⁸ List of the Society instituted in 1787 for the purpose of effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade

By Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade Printed in the year M.DCC.LXXXVIII. 1788

https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=Qh9a_VlnBSUC&pg=PP51&lpg=PP51&dq=samuel+whitbread+society+for+effecting+abolition+of+the+slave+trade&source=bl&ots=tignI9Z0c7&sig=ACfU3U3TWJMU5PV2kU6yvie5_ihzaHZ8w&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiXvdn_a7qAhVIR0EAHcPPAPoQ6AEwDXoECAsQAQ#v=onepage&q=samuel%20whitbread%20society%20for%20effecting%20abolition%20of%20the%20slave%20trade&f=false (Last accessed: 7/7/20)

⁹ <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp06276/samuel-whitbread> (Last accessed 27/6/20)

¹⁰ SLAVE-TRADE ABOLITION BILL. HC Deb 27 February 1807 vol 8 cc1040-5

https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1807/feb/27/slave-trade-abolition-bill#S1V0008P0_18070227_HOC_31 (last accessed 27/6/20)

¹¹ <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/whitbread-samuel-ii-1764-1815> (last accessed 27/6/20)

¹² We need to note that slavery did not end just due to the actions of a few key MPs and abolitionists (male and female). There were also African people involved, such as freed slaves like Ignatius Sancho and Gustavus Vassa <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/rights/abolition.htm> (Last accessed: 27/6/20)

¹³ UCL 'Legacies of British Slavery Project' <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/project/lbspp1> (Last accessed: 27/7/20)

received compensation. His share was £4,000 – £270,000 in today's money – for 1,396 enslaved men and women in St Kitts and Montserrat.¹⁴

It is on the UCL database that we can again tap into the history of the Whitbread family, but for a different reason. Harriet Gordon (nee Whitbread), daughter of Samuel Whitbread is on this list, recorded as having received, and passed on through inheritance, benefits from slavery. She had married James Gordon who was listed as the owner of plantations in St Vincent and Antigua. In a survey of her son's West Indian inheritance in 1824, it showed that 'he owned 885 acres (with 460 enslaved) in Antigua, 421 acres in St. Vincent and 112 in St. Kitt's'.¹⁵ So the family of Harriet Whitbread would have received compensation when they lost those slaves due to the Abolition Act her brother and father had so tirelessly advocated. The British government spent £20 million to buy the freedom of the slaves, British tax payers only finally finished paying off this debt five years ago. Those freed were committed to a further 12 years working for free as 'apprentices' until this was abolished in 1838, they received no compensation.¹⁶

As you can see the Samuel Whitbread family represent the dichotomy of their times, slavery being inextricably linked with the economy of the country and despite the father and son fighting to stop the slave trade and free the enslaved, their daughter / sister directly benefiting from owning slaves and utilising their labour. One can only imagine the heated debates that would have taken place at family gatherings, arguing for and against the slave trade, between members of the same family. The final irony being that the abolition of slavery then financially benefited Harriet's descendants.

The use of slave labour and the slave trade are part of how this country was able to become successful. Therefore, it is necessary to understand this legacy to fully appreciate the attitudes to race that are part of our current society, and which developed from attempts to justify a racialised system of unfree labour that benefited so many British people.

Whitbread PLC takes a firm stance to slavery to this day, with a statement on its website on 'modern day slavery', describing the steps it takes to 'increase the awareness of important issues related to modern slavery across our operations'.¹⁷

¹⁴ Emeritus Professor Catherine Hall (UCL History) *Opinion: The slavery business contributed to the building of modern Britain. Can we make amends?* 24 June 2020 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2020/jun/opinion-slavery-business-contributed-building-modern-britain-can-we-make-amends> (Last accessed: 7/7/20)

¹⁵ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/44878> (Last accessed: 2/7/20)

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200205-how-britain-is-facing-up-to-its-secret-slavery-history> (Last accessed: 27/5/20)

¹⁷ <https://www.whitbread.co.uk/~media/Files/W/Whitbread/documents/2020-modern-slavery/whitbread-modern-slavery-statement-2019-20.pdf>