The City of London and the Slave Trade

A short walk from the Guildhall to Fen Court

The walk will take no more than about 45 minutes including stops. You can add visits to two of London's finest Roman remains as well, both of which are free (though you need to book for the Mithraeum). These are the amphitheatre located under the Guildhall Library and Art Gallery and the Temple of Mithras in the Bloomberg building in Walbrook.

Start at the Square outside:

Guildhall, Gresham Street

The 'town hall' of the City of London. The current building began construction in 1411, significantly financed by the three times Lord Mayor of London Sir Richard Whittington.

The first European nation to engage in the Transatlantic Slave Trade was Portugal in the mid to late 1400's. Captain John Hawkins made the first known English slaving voyage to Africa, in 1562, during the reign of Elizabeth I. Estimates, based on archives records, put the total number of African slaves transported by European traders, at least 12 million people.

London's financial roots are embedded in colonisation of the continents of Africa, India, the Far East and the America's. Profits from slavery, the Royal African Company and the East India Company were huge and many fortunes and philanthropic donations from the 17th to the 19th centuries were based on them.

The extent to which London was dependent on the trade and the role it played in financing Britain's industrial revolution is disputed but was certainly highly significant. The Slave Trade was the richest part of Britain's trade in the 18th century. James Houston, who worked for a firm of 18th-century slave merchants, wrote, "What a glorious and advantageous trade this is… It is the hinge on which all the trade of this globe moves."

But London also became the centre of efforts to abolish the trade in slaves and slavery itself. The British abolitionist movement started in the late 18th century when English and American Quakers began to question the morality of slavery.

In 1787 the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed in London. Led in Parliament by William Wilberforce the United Kingdom

outlawed the international slave trade in 1807, after which Britain led efforts to block slave ships. Britain abolished slavery throughout its empire by the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 (with the notable exception of India).

The Guildhall epitomises the involvement of London in the transatlantic slave trade. This was the meeting place between 1660 and 1690 of 15 Lord Mayors of London, 25 sheriffs and 38 aldermen, all of whom were shareholders in the Royal Africa Company.

Trials at the Guildhall have included those of Anne Askew (the Protestant martyr), Thomas Cranmer (Archbishop of Canterbury), Lady Jane Grey as well and Henry Garnet (executed for his complicity in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605). It was also the site of the first trial connected with the infamous Zong Massacre.

The Zong was a slave ship under the command of Luke Collingwood, formerly a ship's surgeon and lacking experience in navigation. Ship's surgeons were typically involved in selecting kidnapped people for purchase in Africa, their medical expertise supporting the determination of "commodity value" for a captive. If the surgeon rejected a captive, that individual was of no value, and was liable to be killed by the African traders. Sometimes these killings happened in the presence of the surgeon. It is therefore likely that Collingwood had already witnessed the mass killing of enslaved people. Historian Jeremy Krikler suggests that this may have prepared him psychologically to condone the massacre that later took place on the Zong.

The ship sailed from Accra with 442 slaves, more than twice the number of people that it could safely transport, on 18 August 1781.

On 18 November, the ship neared Tobago but failed to stop there to replenish its water supplies. Ten days later the crew sighted Jamaica but misidentified it as the French colony of Saint-Domingue. The mistake was recognised only after the ship was 300 miles from Jamaica. It then turned back.

By this time it is unclear who, if anyone, was in charge of the ship, as Collingwood was gravely ill. The man who would normally have replaced him, first mate James Kelsall, had been suspended from duty but the only passenger, Robert Stubbs, had captained a slave ship several decades earlier and he took command. The breakdown of the command structure on the ship might explain the subsequent navigational errors and the absence of checks on supplies of drinking water.

The situation regarding insurance then became critical. If the slaves died onshore, the Liverpool ship-owners would have had no redress from their insurers. Similarly, if they died a "natural death" from starvation or thirst, again insurance could not be claimed. However, if they were thrown overboard, then a claim could be made at a hefty £30 per person.

So that's what happened. On 29 November, 54 women and children were thrown through cabin windows into the sea. On 1 December, 42 male slaves were thrown overboard, and 36 more followed in the next few days. Another ten, in a display of defiance at the inhumanity of the slavers, chose to commit suicide by jumping into the sea. In total, 142 people were killed by the time the ship reached Jamaica.

When news of the Zong massacre reached Britain, the ship's owners claimed compensation from their insurers for the loss of the enslaved people. The insurers refused to honour the claim and the owners took them to court.

At the first trial here at the Guildhall the jury found in favour of the owners, under an established protocol in maritime insurance that considered slaves as cargo. On 19 March 1783, former slave Olaudah Equiano told the anti-slave-trade activist Granville Sharp of the events aboard Zong and a newspaper soon carried a lengthy account. Sharp sought legal advice the next day, about the possibility of prosecuting the crew for murder. This never happened. Instead summing up the verdict reached in the first trial, Lord Chief Justice the Earl of Mansfield, said that the jury:

> "had no doubt (though it shocks one very much) that the Case of Slaves was the same as if Horses had been thrown over board."

At the appeal by the insurers, supported by Sharpe, Counsel for the owners, the Solicitor General, John Lee, notoriously declared that "the case was the same as if any assets had been thrown overboard" and that "a master could drown slaves without a surmise of impropriety". The insurers' legal team replied that Lee's argument could never justify the killing of innocent people and that the actions of Zong's crew were nothing less than murder.

Sharp and the insurers won the case (though on a technicality rather than humanitarian grounds) and he campaigned to raise awareness of the massacre, writing letters to newspapers, the Lords Commissioners of Admiralty and the Prime Minister (the Duke of Portland). Neither Portland nor the

Admiralty sent him a reply. Only a single London newspaper reported the first Zong trial and little else about the massacre appeared in print before 1787.

But, despite these setbacks, Sharp's efforts did have some success and the Zong massacre became an important topic in abolitionist literature and the massacre was discussed in works by Thomas Clarkson, Ottobah Cugoano, James Ramsay and John Newton. These accounts often omitted the names of the ship and its captain, thereby creating, in the words of Srividhya Swaminathan, "a portrait of abuse that could be mapped onto any ship in the Middle Passage".

The Zong killings offered a powerful example of the horrors of the slave trade, stimulating the development of the abolitionist movement in Britain, which dramatically expanded in size and influence in the late 1780s.

Exit onto Gresham Street. Turn left then right into Old Jewry, then left into Poultry and left again into

Grocers Hall Court

Old Jewry was the site of London's Jewish ghetto in the early Middle Ages and Poultry takes its name, like other roads nearby such as Milk Street and Bread Street, from the various produce once sold there.

This was the site of the Poultry Compter a small prison that operated from the 16th century until 1815. Its connection to slavery is through the abolitionist Granville Sharp. Sharp's brother William was a doctor who ran a clinic for the local poor and when visiting him Granville met a slave, Jonathan Strong. Strong had been badly beaten by his master, a lawyer called David Lisle, and left on the street. After a four month stay at Barts Hospital, paid for by the Sharps, Strong was employed by a Quaker apothecary friend. In 1767 Lisle saw Strong in the street, had him captured and intended to sell him to a Jamaican plantation owner, James Kerr. Strong was imprisoned in the Poultry Compter and Sharp fought a two-year legal battle with Kerr which eventually resulted in Strong's freedom, thought he died only five years later at the age of 25.

Sharp went on to be known as 'the protector of the negro' and pursued several other successful legal cases, the most famous being the Zong massacre.

Return to Poultry. Turn left, then right and left into Lombard Street with the church of St Mary Wolnoth on the corner.

Lombard Street is so named because it formed a plot of land granted by King Edward I to goldsmiths from the part of northern Italy known as Lombardy.

St Mary Wolnoth

The present building is one of the Queen Anne Churches, designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor, Wren's assistant and also responsible for Christ Church Spitalfields that's covered in my East End Philanthropy Walk. It's connection with abolition is through John Newton, its rector from 1779. Newton was remarkable among abolitionists because of his earlier direct involvement in the slave trade.

At 18 he had been press ganged into the Royal Navy before becoming a virtual slave himself in West Africa. Rescued in 1748 he became first mate on a slave ship, making three voyages. After a spell as a tax collector, he was ordained as a priest in 1764 however, until 1788, he kept his views on slavery quiet. In that year he published *Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade* a powerful abolitionist pamphlet in which he expressed his remorse for having participated in the trade himself. He sent copies to every MP and became an ally of William Wilberforce. But perhaps his most lasting contribution to the campaign was as a composer. Together with the poet William Cowper he composed hymns including 'Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken', 'How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds' and, most famous of all, 'Amazing Grace', one of the most influential songs of all time.

Continue down Lombard Street and turn left into:

George Yard

The church on the corner is St Edmund, King and Martyr, named after the king of East Anglia from about 855 until his death in 869. In that year Danish invaders, known as the Great Heathen Army advanced on East Anglia and Edmund, by later tradition, met his death at an unidentified place known as Haegelisdun. After he refused the Danes' demand that he renounce Christ: the Danes beat him, shot him with arrows and then beheaded him, on the orders of Ivar the Boneless and his brother Ubba. According to one legend, his head was then thrown into the forest, but was found by searchers following the cries of an ethereal wolf calling out in Latin, "Hic, Hic, Hic" – "Here, Here, Here".

The building that once stood at 2 George Yard was a bookstore and printing shop. The proprietor was James Phillips, publisher and printer for Britain's small community of Quakers. It was following a meeting here on 22 May 1787 that the British abolitionist movement was formed, led by Thomas Clarkson. Two years later Phillips published one of the most important books of the movement, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano.*

Equiano was born in the Kingdom of Benin and was kidnapped at the age of 11 being transported first to Barbados then Virginia. After being bought by a Royal Navy officer (and renamed several times, a fate suffered by all slaves that served to remove their own identities) Equiano arrived in England and served with his master in the Seven Years War. He was sold twice more but after being taught to read and write took part in trading in the West Indies and was able to purchase his freedom. After further service in the Royal Navy, even travelling to the Arctic, he settled in London in the 1780s and became involved in the abolitionist movement. He married an Englishwoman and died in 1797.

Return to Lombard and continue to cross Gracechurch Street and into Fenchurch Street. After passing Cullum Street turn left into:

Fen Court and Fen Court Garden

'Gilt of Cain' Monument – Fen Court

The Court is the site of the former St Gabriel Fenchurch which was destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666.

The sculpture commemorates the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807 and is a collaboration between sculptor Michael Visocchi and poet Lemn Sissay, the words being an extract from his poem 'The Gilt of Cain'. It was unveiled by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in 2008.

The platform could represent either a pulpit or a slave auctioneers' podium and the pillars either the congregation or stems of sugar cane.

The title of the poem refers both to the biblical story of Cain, slaying his brother Abel – in other words the 'guilt' that should be felt about the slave trade – and also to 'gilt' as a reference to the riches of the City of London which were partly founded on the trade itself.