

# HISTORICAL ENQUIRY

## HOW TOLERANT WAS VICTORIAN BRITAIN?

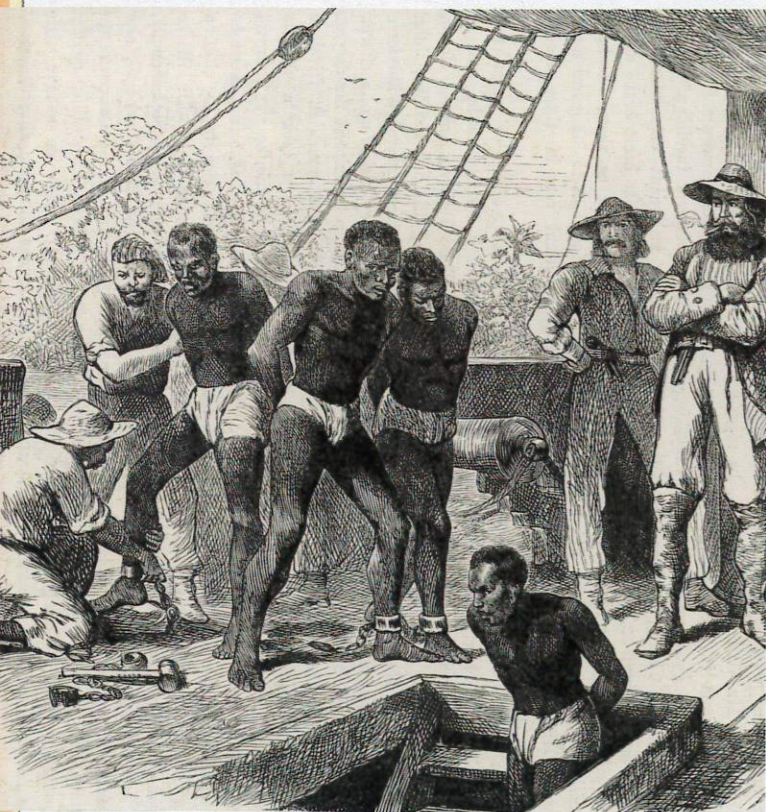
The trade in slaves was driven by greed. Some Europeans realised they could become very rich by growing sugar, cotton and tobacco in the 'New World' and selling it back home. But they needed lots of people to work on the plantations growing these products – and they didn't want to pay them. Some Africans realised that they could make money by supplying slave labour to the Europeans. African men, women and children were usually captured by warriors from other tribes, kept in cages until a slave trader arrived, and then exchanged for goods. But how did they get to the plantations in the New World? Why were they treated the way they were? And how do we know about their horrific journeys?

## 2: On board the *Brookes*

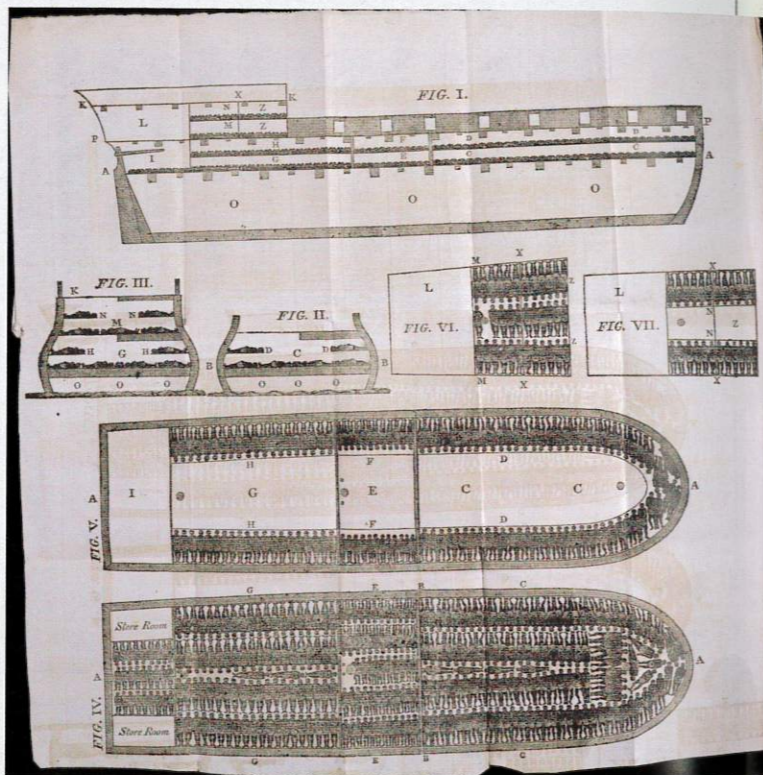
### MISSION OBJECTIVES

- To be able to explain how people ended up on slave ships.
- To evaluate sources in order to understand what conditions were like on board a slave ship.

One of the many ships that transported slaves across the Atlantic was called the *Brookes*, based in Liverpool. It made its owners a fortune by completing the journey around the 'slave triangle' a number of times. We know this because they kept detailed records of the journeys made, cargo carried and profits gained. After all, buying and selling human beings wasn't illegal, so slave traders treated it like any other professional business.



**SOURCE A:** This eighteenth-century illustration shows slaves being loaded on board a ship for an Atlantic crossing.



**SOURCE B:** A plan of the *Brookes*. No space was wasted.

The owners of the *Brookes* decided that, if they crammed slaves into every square inch, they could carry over 400 slaves (see Source B). The distance between the decks was only 1.5m, so even if they weren't chained to the floor, the slaves were unable to stand up. Men were loaded into the bow (the front), children in the centre and women in the stern (back part of the ship).

Life on board was horrific. Temperatures below deck reached 35°C and the lack of fresh air made seasickness and heatstroke very common. The only toilet was a bucket – but many were unable to reach it so they ended up lying in their own waste. The movement of the ship meant that, soon, everybody would be lying in it and, as a result, **dysentery**, a deadly form of diarrhoea, spread like wild fire among the slaves.

The journey lasted between 40 and 70 days and, from 1510 to 1833, over 10 million slaves were taken across the Atlantic in this way. It is estimated that some 2 million African people died making the crossing in ships like the *Brookes* during this time.

Despite the horrific death toll, slave traders actually wanted the slaves to be in good condition when they arrived at their destination. As they got nearer to the plantations, they were taken out to the top deck for air and exercise and given buckets of food to share. For those that survived the journey, the ordeal was still not over when they reached the shore. They then faced the prospect of being sold.

## Work

- Why were so many slaves packed on board the ships?
  - Why do you think the slaves were chained together for most of the voyage?
  - Why do you think slave traders wanted slaves to be healthy and in good condition when they arrived? Does their treatment surprise you, then?

2 a Copy and complete the following table:

Source	What does it show?	Why is it useful to us today?

- Which source do you think is most useful to a historian? Give reasons for your explanation.
- Many slave traders were very proud of the way they ran their businesses. They often invited observers on voyages to see the 'slave triangle' for themselves.

Imagine you are one such observer, invited onto the *Brookes* by a slave trader. Write a short letter to a friend, describing your journey and your feelings about the voyage.

- Each slave on the *Brookes* made an average of £22 profit for their dealer when sold. If the ship carried 410 slaves, how much profit would the slave trader make in total?
  - Do the large profits justify the trade in human beings? Explain your answer carefully.

## WISE-UP Words

### dysentery

'The poor creatures, thus cramped for want of room, are likewise in irons, for the most part both hands and feet, and two together, which makes it difficult for them to turn or move, to rise or lie down, without hurting themselves.'

**SOURCE C:** Taken from the Journal of a slave trader, 1788. Written by ex-slave trader, John Newton.

'The floor was covered with blood and mucus. It looked like a slaughterhouse. After 15 minutes down there I had to leave. The heat and the stink made me nearly faint.'

**SOURCE D:** Written by a doctor after a visit to a slave ship.

'Some died of dysentery, "the bloody flux". Others died of harsh treatment and poor food. Some with infectious diseases, such as smallpox, were thrown to the sharks. Others went mad and were clubbed to death. Some committed suicide by hanging themselves or jumping ship.'

**SOURCE E:** From *Black Peoples of the Americas* by Bea Stimpson, 2001.

### MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

- Could you tell someone how some Africans became slaves?
- Have you explained why the above sources are useful to us?
- Can you describe the conditions on board a slave ship?