

## HISTORICAL ENQUIRY

### HOW TOLERANT WAS VICTORIAN BRITAIN?

Before any slaves were sold, they were cleaned up. They were washed down with water and given oil to rub into their skin to make them look shinier and healthier. Hot tar or rust was rubbed into any sores or ulcers picked up while crossing the Atlantic in order to disguise them. One ship's captain, whose slaves were suffering from terrible diarrhoea, instructed the doctor to push a short, thick piece of rope up the backside of each of them before the auction took place. So why did they want the slaves to look healthy? How did slaves change hands? And how did slave owners identify their new 'property'?

## 3: A slave sale

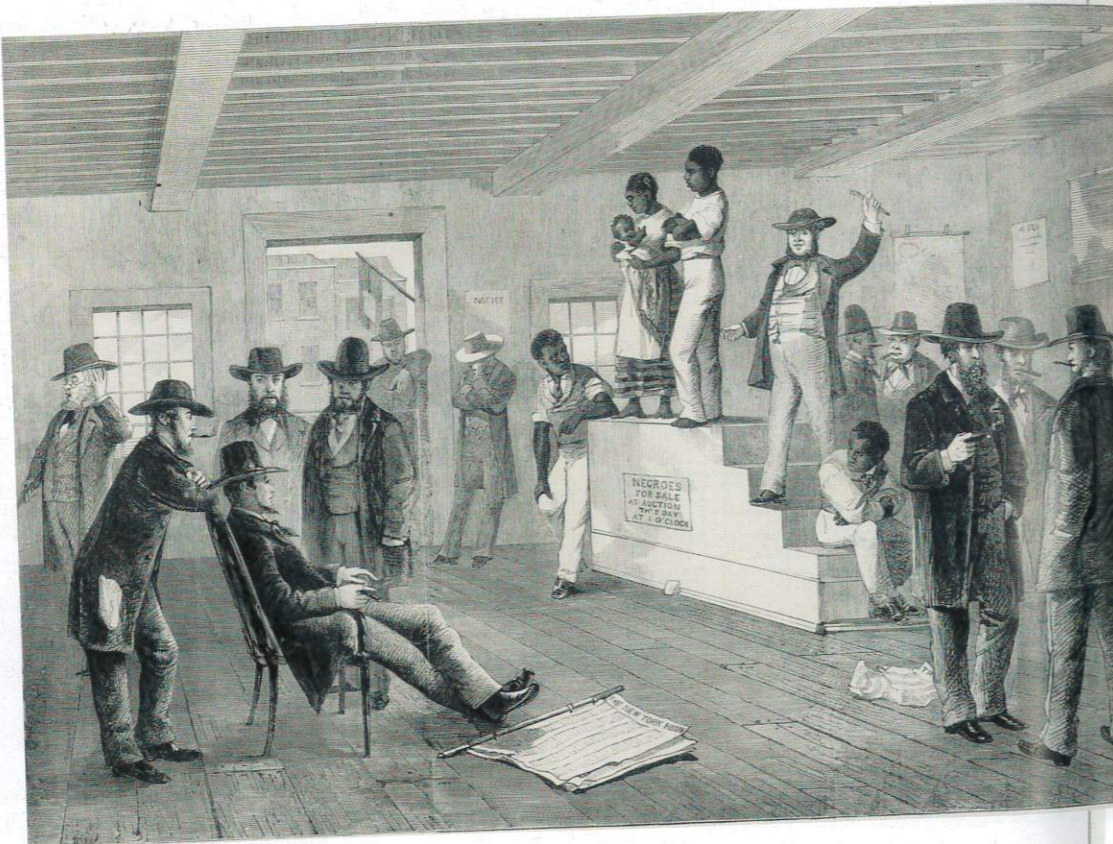
### MISSION OBJECTIVES

- To be able to explain how traders prepared slaves in order to maximise their profits.
- To understand why some slaves were sold for a higher price than others.
- To be able to describe two separate ways in which slaves were sold.

There were two main ways to buy a slave: **auction** or **scramble**.

'Auction' – slaves were paraded in front of buyers and examined like cattle. They were then made to stand on an auction block and buyers would 'bid' for them. They were sold to the person who paid the most. Unhealthy, unsold slaves were left to die without food or water.

'Scramble' – the slave trader would set a fixed price for his slaves. At a given signal, usually a horn or a drumbeat, the buyers would rush into the cage and grab the slaves they liked the best. You can probably tell why it was called a scramble!

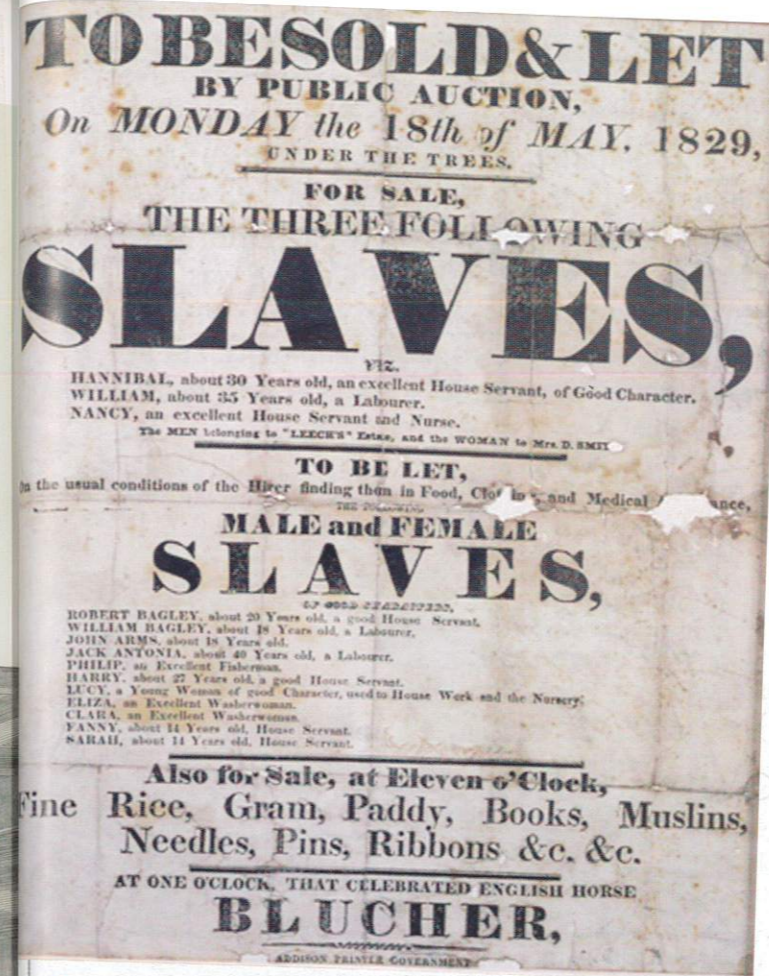


↑ SOURCE B: A slave auction.

### FACT Selling slaves

In Jamaica in 1787, a slave called Jimmy fetched £330. He was a good carpenter 'in his prime'. At the same auction, a slave called Butler only cost 6d (2.5p). He was described as 'a very **indifferent** fellow with bad legs'.

↑ SOURCE A: A description by Olaudah Equiano, who was sold at a 'scramble'.



↑ SOURCE C: A poster advertising a slave sale. Can you see what else was being sold that day?

'I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all. The children were sold to a slave trader, and the mother was bought by a man in her town. Before night, her children were all far away. She begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take them; this he refused to do. How could he when he knew he would sell them, one by one, wherever he could command the highest price? I met the mother in the street and her wild, haggard face was today in my mind. She wrung her hands in anguish and exclaimed, "Gone, all gone! Why don't God kill me? Slavery is terrible."'

↑ SOURCE D: Written by Harriet Jacobs in her book, *Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861.

Once bought, slaves became the personal property of their owner. They were even given European names in an attempt to make them forget their past. Then, like cattle, they were **branded** with their owner's initials on their face, chest or back. They were now ready to start work.

## WISE-UP Words

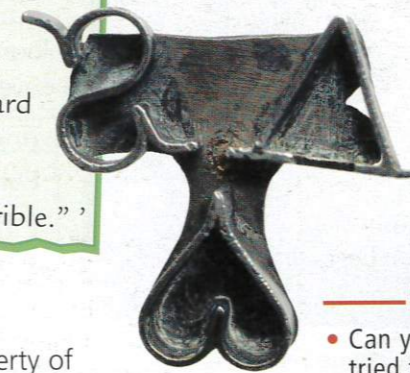
auction  
branded indifferent  
scramble

### Work

- 1 a How and why were slaves cleaned up before they were sold?  
b What was a 'scramble'?
- 2 Look at Source C.  
a How many slaves were up for sale?  
b Describe how a slave auction works.  
c What do you think 'to be let' meant?  
d How many slaves were 'to be let'?  
e What would the hirer of a 'let' slave be expected to provide for them?  
f Which of the slaves up for sale would you expect to fetch the highest price? Give reasons for your choice.  
g Write a short paragraph explaining how a young person might feel if they were one of the slaves about to be sold or hired. Start your paragraph, 'I am going to the auction today. I feel...'

TOP TIP: You might want to brainstorm some of the words and emotions a slave might have felt as they approached the auction room.

- 3 Look at Source D. In your own words, explain why the woman in the story says that 'slavery is terrible'.
- 4 Look at Source E.  
a What was the purpose of this branding tool?  
b Why do you think the slaves were given a new name?



↑ SOURCE E: This is a branding tool. The new owner of a slave would burn his initials onto the slave using this.

### MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

- Can you name two ways in which traders tried to make their slaves look healthier?
- Do you know why some slaves cost more money than others?
- Could you describe the differences between the two different types of slave sale?