

HISTORICAL ENQUIRY

HOW TOLERANT WAS VICTORIAN BRITAIN?

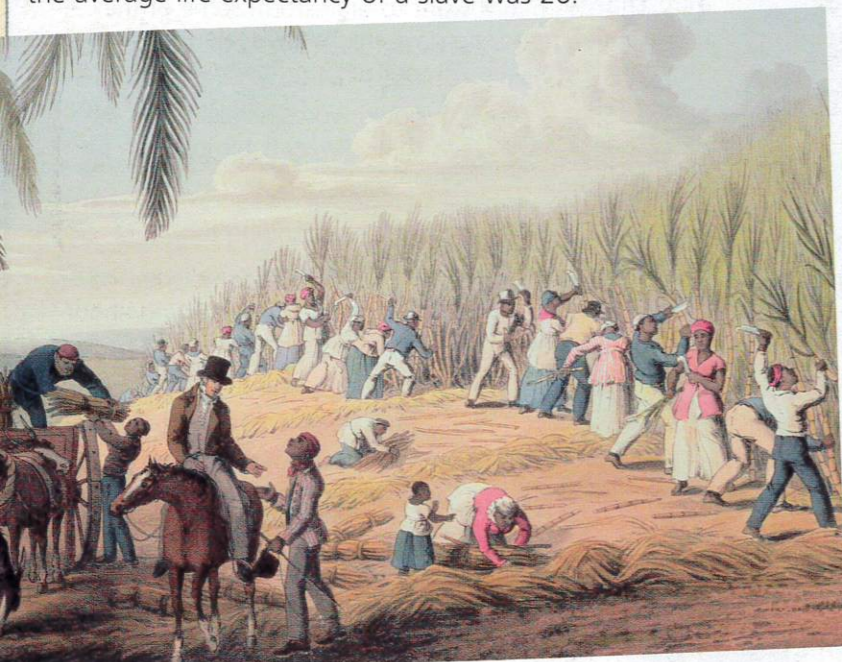
Slaves were sent to do a variety of jobs in a number of different countries – but their lives were always hard. On huge farms, called plantations, they were forced to plant, look after and harvest crops that would sell for big money in Europe. Sugar was grown in the West Indies, cotton was grown in North America, tobacco was grown in North and South America, and coffee was grown in South America. Between 1510 and 1833, millions of Africans were moved to these places until they outnumbered the original inhabitants. But at what age were slaves sent to work? What was their daily life like? And what happened if they dared to break the rules?

4: A life of slavery

MISSION OBJECTIVES

- To be able to describe the kind of life that slaves were forced to lead.
- To understand how and why some slaves reacted to this harsh treatment.

A slave would be expected to work for most of his or her life. Three and four year olds would work in 'trash gangs' (weeding) or as water-can carriers. Between the ages of nine and twelve, they would start to work in the fields with the adults. As they got older, slaves would often do less exhausting jobs, such as gardening, horse-and-carriage driving, cooking, cleaning or nursing. However, hard work, a poor diet, tough punishments and no proper medical attention meant that few slaves lived to any great age. Shockingly, the average life expectancy of a slave was 26.



SOURCE A: A sugar plantation in the West Indies, 1823. Paintings like this would hang in the homes of proud plantation owners.

SOURCE C: Based on a report by a visitor to a plantation.

5:30am	– Go straight to fields. Take breakfast with you. Work until 8:00am. Latecomers are whipped.
8:00am	– Stop work for breakfast: boiled yam and okra seasoned with salt and pepper.
8:30am	– Continue with work.
12:00pm	– Rest and lunch: salted meat or pickled fish.
2:00pm	– Start work again.
6:00pm	– Return to huts.
Night time	– During the harvest season, work in the mill or boiling houses through the night.

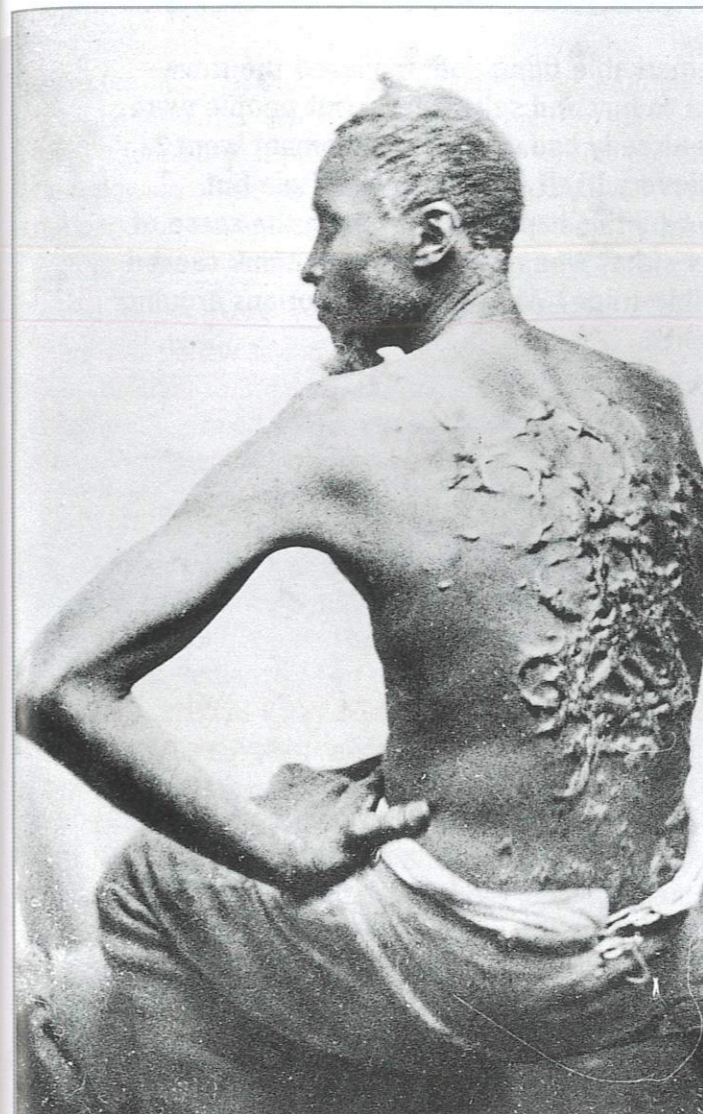
SOURCE B: A slave's day.

Slaves had no legal rights. They weren't allowed to learn to read or write, marry, or own property. As you might imagine, some slaves tried to run away but this was a very risky business as they could easily be caught. Special teams of 'runaway hunters' scoured the countryside looking for them. Any runaway slaves were severely punished (see Sources C and D).

PUNISHMENTS FOR SLAVES WHO BREAK MY LAWS

For any rebellions: rebels nailed to the ground then burnt; fire applied starting at the feet, gradually moving up to the head.
For continued running away: removal of hand, foot or testicles with an axe.
For running away: neck ring or iron **muzzle**.
Failing to do duties properly: **lashed** for every year of the slave's life.

R Kennedy, plantation owner, Jamaica 1767



SOURCE D: A photograph of an escaped slave named Gordon.

WISE-UP Words

lashed muzzle
okra revolt yam

Some slaves joined together and started rebellions. In 1791, a **revolt** started on the island of St Dominque in the West Indies. The slaves, led by a man called Toussaint L'Ouverture, set fire to the sugar cane fields and murdered their white masters. First, they defeated British troops sent to sort out the trouble... and then a French army. In 1800, the 'free' slaves renamed their island. They called it Haiti. This was the first island run by former black slaves in the West Indies. Perhaps others would follow...

Work

- What was the attitude of the slave owners towards their slaves?
 - Why do you think many slave owners treated their slaves so brutally, especially when they tried to escape?
 - As a slave, write a diary entry of NO MORE than 250 words, describing a day in your life.
- Look at Source A.
 - Describe what it shows.
 - The working conditions in this picture don't appear to be that bad. What could explain this?
- Look at Source E.
 - Why were advertisements like this produced?
 - Why do you think the owner believes the runaway slave will look for a job on a steamboat?
 - The owner asks that this slave is returned so that he 'can use him again'. What is the owner worried about? Look at Sources C and D before writing your answer.
- What effect do you think the revolt in St Dominque would have had on slave owners in other countries? Explain your answer carefully.
 - Why do you think Haiti is a very special island to many Africans, even today?

\$150 REWARD

RUNAWAY SLAVE – left on the night of the 2nd
 A negro man, who calls himself HENRY MAY, about 22 years old, 5 feet 6 or 8 inches tall, ordinary colour, chunky build, bushy head and has it divided mostly on one side, keeps it very nicely combed, has been raised in the house and is a first-rate dining room servant. Worked in a tavern in Louisville for 18 months. I expect he has gone back there. He may try to get employment on a steamboat. He is a good cook and is very handy. When he left, he was wearing a dark red coat, dark red pants [trousers], new – he had other clothes too.
 50 dollar reward if taken in Louisville, 100 dollars if taken one hundred miles from Louisville but still in this state, and 150 dollars if taken out of this state, and delivered to me, or secured in jail so that I can use him again.

WILLIAM BURKE

Bardstown, Kentucky, 3 September, 1838

SOURCE E: A copy of a reward poster for an escaped slave. Although it was dangerous, thousands of slaves fled to states in North America that had already freed slaves.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

- Can you describe the kind of work that slaves were forced to do?
- Could you tell someone two ways in which slaves were punished?
- Do you know what was special about Haiti?