



December 2007 Newsletter

The Development of the International Slavery Museum

By Dr. Richard Benjamin*

Introduction

National Museums Liverpool is the only group of national museums in England based entirely outside London. We are active locally, regionally, nationally and internationally, reflecting the organisation's unique status as a national institution based in a major regional city. The group includes art galleries holding world famous collections -- the Walker Art Gallery, the Lady Lever Art Gallery and Sudley House. In addition, we look after four museums -- World Museum Liverpool, Merseyside Maritime Museum, HM Customs & Excise Museum and now the International Slavery Museum plus a venue that houses our conservation department, the National Conservation Centre.

Phase 1

Phase 1 of the International Slavery Museum opened on Slavery Remembrance Day 2007 (23 August) a day that commemorates an uprising of the enslaved Africans on the island of St Domingo (modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic) in 1791. Designated by UNESCO, the date was chosen as a reminder that enslaved Africans were the main agents of their own liberation. The country was also marking the bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade Act. Ultimately, the museum will offer the visitor a greater understanding of the world around them by telling a story of resilience and survival against all the odds, one that is testament to the unquenchable nature of the human spirit.

The new museum will build on the success of the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery until recently in the Merseyside Maritime Museum, which was opened by Dr. Maya Angelou in 1994. It will tell the story of transatlantic slavery -- a powerful economic force in world trade, and a destroyer of lives and families on a massive scale, for over four centuries. The new museum will be more than twice the size of the old gallery and will go much further in explaining the extent to which the world has changed as a result of that trade.

Phase 1 includes the building of new galleries on the 3rd floor of the existing Merseyside Maritime Museum and will explore the story of transatlantic slavery from the complex and vital cultures of West Africa before the coming of the Europeans, through the horrific Middle Passage onboard ship, to life in the Americas. The galleries will demonstrate the determined and

relentless resistance to enslavement, and how enslaved people themselves contributed to gaining their eventual freedom.



The "Fight for Freedom and Equality" exhibit wall at the International Slavery Museum (ISM).
Photograph by C. Lee Garland.

Key messages that will be communicated in the new display galleries are that transatlantic slavery:

- created a permanent and enduring injustice;
- changed the history of Africa, Europe and the Americas;
- was brutal and dehumanising;
- was resisted by the enslaved at every opportunity;
- requires a shared understanding and a shared commitment to combat the consequences; and
- created an African Diaspora which has had profound influence on Western culture.

The galleries will also highlight contemporary concerns such as human rights, under-development in Africa and the Caribbean, and racial discrimination -- examining key questions, such as what it means to be British and Black and racial stereotyping. Displays will explore how people of African descent have contributed to cultural transformation in both the Americas and Europe. The displays in the new museum will challenge preconceptions and address issues which are of relevance to everyone today.



The "Black Achievers" exhibit wall at the ISM. Photograph by C. Lee Garland.

Phase 2

Phase Two will see the development of the Centre for the Study of International Slavery (CSIS) to be opened in 2010 in what is now the Dock Traffic Office, a building adjacent to the Merseyside Maritime Museum. The buildings will be joined by a glass walkway. The building will include exhibition space, an archive, a learning suite, a community zone, and facilities for researchers, visiting scholars and importantly members of the public. Not only will the Centre offer facilities for those interested in both historical and contemporary aspects of slavery but it aims to contribute to greater understanding and informed debate about slavery and its many legacies. It will promote an international, comparative, and interdisciplinary approach to examine the cultural and social effects of the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, and resistance, on all societies involved. CSIS will also further the study of memorialisation, and of the interpretation of slavery as part of a wider public history agenda and to increase understanding of contemporary global issues. We aim to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and opinions between scholars based in Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and North and South America.

The Centre will facilitate access to rich archival and material collections, while offering a strong focus on questions of culture and heritage. While the Centre's primary focus will be on scholarly research, this activity is designed to contribute to learning and outreach programmes and events for local communities, schools, volunteers, lifelong learners, and the general public. These will raise awareness of the persistence of slavery and means of its eradication, as well as encourage debate about attitudes towards freedom, race, ethnicity, tolerance, respect, and citizenship.

To achieve our aims, the Centre will organise interdisciplinary academic conferences, seminars and workshops; we are building up an international slavery research network with scholars in Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the USA. We are committed to providing facilities and support for visiting scholars, especially promising young researchers. We also strive to make the extensive archival and other resources that are available in Liverpool more accessible to scholars and general audiences. We will disseminate research outcomes through public lectures and events, through the Centre's monograph series, as well as through our contributions to National Museum Liverpool's nationally acclaimed learning and outreach programmes.

Liverpool: Capital of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

The transatlantic slave trade was the greatest forced migration in history, and it changed the world forever. To understand modern Africa, South America, the Caribbean, the USA and Western Europe, one must understand the story of transatlantic slavery and its consequences.



Exhibit with a model of a plantation at the ISM. Photograph by C. Lee Garland.

Liverpool was a key European port from which slave ships set sail for Africa, and the city grew rich on the profits of trading in enslaved people. Goods, including guns, alcohol and textiles, were taken to Africa and exchanged for enslaved Africans, who were then taken to the Americas to be sold. Ships then sailed from the Americas for Europe laden with goods such as sugar, coffee, cotton and tobacco, and then the whole sordid business started all over again.

Bristol merchants were the first to profit, but within 40 years Liverpool had overtaken London and Bristol as the largest trader. By the 1780s Liverpool was the European capital of the transatlantic slave trade. Liverpool was easily accessed by rivers and canals and as such trade goods like cloth, guns and iron were cheaply brought to the port. Liverpool merchants also had the necessary business know how and undercut their rivals, reducing turnaround times and increasing the flexibility of operation. Added to this were the close relationships which had been developed with some African traders and as such the Liverpool merchants knew which goods they wanted.

The legacies left by transatlantic slavery are wide and varied. Some have had a transformational and astonishing influence, such as the development of popular culture in the Americas and its influence on the world. Others are sinister and depressing, such as racism. The museum will explore how people continue to challenge slavery's destructive legacy of prejudice, intolerance and global economic inequality, and will stimulate dialogue and debate around the subject.

Conclusion

As someone of Guyanese descent I was extremely proud and excited at being given the opportunity of heading both a world class museum and research Centre which looks at both the historical and contemporary aspects of slavery. Added to that I aim to make the International Slavery Museum a valuable resource for the local community, in particular the local Black community, as well as visitors from elsewhere. It is vital that members of the Black community in particular feel empowered and involved in the development of the International Slavery Museum. From consultations which have already taken place we have also found that many



The author at the museum. Photograph by Jonathan Player, New York Times.

members of the Black community, both elders and those from the younger generation want the messages which visitors take away from their visit to the museum to be a positive one. The experience should not denigrate the horror of the transatlantic slave trade or contemporary forms of slavery by any means but the many positive achievements of the Black presence in Britain and in particular Liverpool should be fully understood and acknowledged.

The International Slavery Museum should not only act as an instrument of education but as a tool of social change, challenging many of the misconceptions generally held towards the subject of slavery. Whether or not racist incidents instigated in contemporary Britain are a direct result of Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade has yet to be fully understood but the International Slavery Museum here in Liverpool should act as the conduit to answer such challenging questions.

Note

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