

# Slavery: The Crossed Paths of the British and Portuguese

by  
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Although British people probably associate slavery with the trade carried out by British ships between Africa and North America, the involvement of European countries in the slave trade did, in fact, originate with Portugal, and Portuguese ships transported more slaves from Africa than did British ones (5.8mn compared with 3.2mn).<sup>1</sup> In fact, the percentage of African slaves that were shipped by all countries to the North American mainland seems to have represented a relatively small proportion of the total slave trade.<sup>2</sup> This article looks at slavery carried out by the two countries and, drawing on previous articles published by the Society, places a particular focus on two occasions when Britain put pressure on Portugal to end the practice.

## Origins of African slavery

Early Portuguese explorers discovered a pre-existent slave trade in Africa and adopted the practice for their own purposes. Lagos in the Algarve became the gateway for the first African slaves into Europe in 1444, with the sale of 235 slaves.<sup>3</sup> The *Mercado de Escravos* in Lagos remains a visible sign of this trade. Slaves were being used on a sugar plantation in Madeira by 1460<sup>4</sup> and another early use of slaves was for land reclamation in the Algarve.<sup>5</sup> Many slaves were sold on to other countries and, as the major sponsor of the slave-trading expeditions, Prince Henry the Navigator received one-fifth of the selling price of every slave.<sup>6 7</sup> Trade of slaves across the Atlantic, mainly to South America, was started by the Portuguese in about 1502. In all, Portuguese (and Brazilian) ships are believed to have carried 5.8 million slaves into captivity, mostly to Brazil, before slavery was finally abolished in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> However, as discussed below, the abolition of slavery did not put an end to similar abusive practices, such as enforced contract labour, which continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



*Mercado de Escravos, Lagos*

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<sup>1</sup> Slave Voyages: <https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic\\_slave\\_trade](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic_slave_trade)

<sup>3</sup> Politico. *Portugal confronts its slave past*. 2 June 2018. <https://www.politico.eu/article/portugal-slave-trade-confronts-its-past/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.discoveringbristol.org.uk/slavery/routes/places-involved/europe/portugal/>

<sup>5</sup> Understanding Slavery Initiative. *Portugal Case Study*. [http://www.understandingslavery.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=364\\_portugal-case-study&catid=126&Itemid=217.html](http://www.understandingslavery.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=364_portugal-case-study&catid=126&Itemid=217.html)

<sup>6</sup> Clive Willis. *David Livingstone, Africa, and the Portuguese*. BHSP Annual Report 32, 2005. pp 31-49 [https://www.bhspportugal.org/uploads/fotos\\_artigos/files/DavidLivingstone.pdf](https://www.bhspportugal.org/uploads/fotos_artigos/files/DavidLivingstone.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia article on Lagos: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagos,\\_Portugal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagos,_Portugal)

<sup>8</sup> Politico, *op cit*

John Hawkins is considered to have been the first English slave trader. He left England in 1562 on a voyage that would see him selling slaves in Santo Domingo in what is now the Dominican Republic. However, at this time British interests were mainly focussed on exploiting African products rather than people and between 1553 and 1660 rights were granted to many British merchants to trade in goods such as ivory, gold, pepper, and indigo. There was inevitably much rivalry with other European powers, especially Portugal, Holland, Denmark and Sweden, and the level of competition led to many companies making losses. The rivalry would only increase once plantation slavery was introduced in the Americas, but while some made losses, for others the opportunity to trade in slaves led to large fortunes.<sup>9</sup>

Portuguese Brazil played an incidental role in the development of slavery by the British. In the 1640s Dutch merchants introduced sugar to British Barbados, using the knowledge they had gained from the Brazilian plantations that they seized from the Portuguese in 1630. While work on the Barbados plantations was initially done by convict labour, this proved insufficient for the task and, soon, Barbadian plantation owners were employing large gangs of African slaves and passing many laws restricting the rights of these slaves. In particular, slaves were defined as “property”. And, as with all property, they tended to be itemised. They were listed in plantation accounts, recorded for tax reasons and detailed alongside other transferable goods on the pages of thousands of wills. This is one reason why so much is known about the slave trade today, often to the embarrassment of people living in the 21st century.<sup>10 11</sup>

Portugal and Britain were the two most “successful” slave-trading countries. Together, they accounted for about 70% of all slaves transported. Britain was a major trader between 1640 and 1807, when the British slave trade was abolished. The companies that had earlier been granted commodity trading rights developed the English slave trade and trading routes but it was not until the business was opened up to all English merchants in 1698 that Britain became the dominant slave trader. The European slave trade invariably involved a triangular arrangement. Ships sailed from Europe to West Africa where they picked up slaves for direct transportation to the Americas. There they used the proceeds from the sale of slaves to buy commodities, which they would sell on their return to Europe.<sup>12</sup>

Following the 1807 abolition of slave trading by Britain (slavery, itself, was not abolished in British colonies until 1838) the country assumed the role of international policeman. The British Navy was sent to patrol the coast of West Africa and the Caribbean on the lookout for illegal slavers and also entered African coastal rivers and waterways, in some cases bombarding slaving settlements. Treaties were signed with slave-owning and slave-trading countries (including Portugal), which led to the gradual suppression of the slave trade to North America. However, as the result of treaties signed between Portugal and Britain in 1815 and 1817, which did not cover slave trading south of the equator, the Portuguese *Junta do Comércio* gave ships departing from Lisbon permission to traffic African slaves to Brazil until 1828. Increasingly, these were ships contracted by Brazilian traders and funded by banks in Rio de Janeiro rather than Portugal<sup>13</sup> and slaves were by then being sourced from Mozambique as well as West Africa.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The National Archives. *Britain and the Slave Trade*. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/slavery/pdf/britain-and-the-trade.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> The Guardian. *The history of British slave ownership has been buried: now its scale can be revealed*. 12 July 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/12/british-history-slavery-buried-scale-revealed>

<sup>12</sup> The National Archives *op cit*

<sup>13</sup> Jaime Rodrigues. *“In this Trade, No Places are Held”*: *Involvement of Portuguese slave traders in the slave trade between Africa and Brazil (1818-1828)*. *História* vol.36. [http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0101-90742017000100516](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0101-90742017000100516)

<sup>14</sup> L. M. Bethell. *Britain, Portugal and the Suppression of the Brazilian Slave Trade: The Origins of Lord Palmerston's Act of 1839*. *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 80, No. 317. 1965

The abolition of slavery within Portugal had been decreed by the Marquis of Pombal in 1761 but the transatlantic slave trade was not formally outlawed until 1836, under the instigation of the Marquis Sá da Bandeira. The use of slaves within the African Portuguese colonies, however, was not definitively abolished until 1869, and slavery was finally abolished in Brazil in 1888, although slave trading had been declared illegal by that country in 1850.



Marquis of Sá da Bandeira



William Wilberforce

### David Livingstone and Portuguese slavery

In this context it is relevant to note the article by Clive Willis on the activities of David Livingstone in Southern Africa, which appeared in the Society's 2005 Annual Report. Born in 1813 near Glasgow, Livingstone was employed by the London Missionary Society at the age of 25 and sailed to the Cape of Good Hope. From there he travelled 1000km north to Kuruman, where he joined the mission station of a fellow Scot, Robert Moffat. Like Moffat, who had made no conversions in five years, Livingstone proved inept at promoting the Gospel, despite being a fine linguist, making only one convert who was the father of a boy he succeeded in curing of dysentery. Marrying Moffat's daughter, Livingstone embarked on a series of journeys, together with his wife and growing family.<sup>15</sup>

In 1851 Livingstone shipped his family back to the UK, where they lived in what Willis called "Dickensian penury" until he rejoined them in 1856.<sup>16</sup> This gave him the freedom to head for Luanda, Angola, with the prime intention of investigating the extent of slavery in the area. He was already aware that one ethnic group was trading cotton goods for slaves, and that the slavers were often accompanied by mixed-race, Afro-Portuguese *pombeiros*<sup>17</sup>. This he confirmed when arriving in Barotseland (now incorporated into Zambia), when he met António de Silva Porto, a *pombeiro* who came from Oporto. Silva Porto even invited him to dinner and gave him a gift of two Dutch cheeses.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Clive Willis, *op cit*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> *Pombeiros* were Itinerant traders

<sup>18</sup> Willis *ibid*

Livingstone resolved not to be associated with the slave trader and left for Luanda in November 1853, arriving in April, 1854, very close to death. There he was housed at the home of Edmund Gabriel, Her Majesty's Commissioner for the suppression of the transatlantic slave trade. By this time the number of slaves crossing the Atlantic from Angola was down to a few hundred a year due to the Anglo-Portuguese treaties and British naval patrols. However, Livingstone noted that there was still a flourishing internal slave trade, often with the involvement of Portuguese officers. He then headed back east, completing his journey in Quelimane, Mozambique in May 1856. As in Angola he was showered with hospitality by Portuguese officials, and wrote of their "disinterested kindness". But in Mozambique he was disappointed to find more examples of slavery, which was feeding Portuguese plantations. Nevertheless, on his return to the UK he wrote a letter to *The Times* in which he was optimistic about the prospects of Portuguese colonies abandoning the slave trade although, in time, he became "increasingly vitriolic" about slavery in Portuguese East Africa.<sup>19</sup>

In Britain, Livingstone embarked on the 19<sup>th</sup> century version of a Lecture Tour. But the lure of Africa was too strong to detain him for long and in 1858 he headed again to Africa, accompanied by his unfortunate wife who was to die in Africa while pregnant. Based in Quelimane, but travelling widely during six years, Livingstone found the slave-trading *pombeiros* increasingly active in East Africa, ruthlessly killing those for whom they had no use. He also discovered that the Sultan of Zanzibar was an active slave trader, supplying slaves to the Indian Ocean islands.<sup>20</sup>

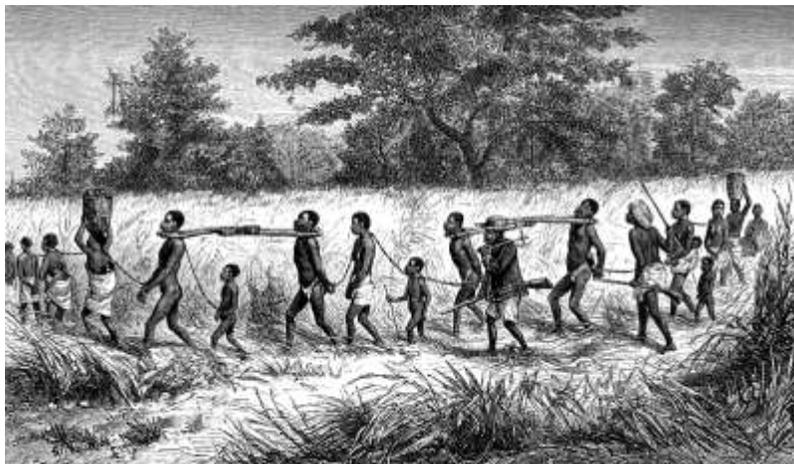


Illustration from Livingstone's *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and Its Tributaries, and of the Discovery of the Lakes Shirwa and Nyassa, 1858-1864*.

In 1865, Livingstone published a *Narrative* of his second expedition. The response from Portugal was critical because his writings were seen as part of an effort to stake claims on territory considered to be Portuguese. Portuguese writers claimed that he was simply mapping Portuguese territory that Portugal had not yet had time to map itself. However, claims that Portugal could not end slavery because it lacked resources to do so were eventually one factor in undermining the country's position at the 1884 Congress of Berlin (also known as the Congo Conference). It could hardly claim to control territory if it could not control slavery in that territory. Britain came away from that Conference with large chunks of land as part of its intention to control land from the "Cape to Cairo". This would lead, a few years later, to Lord Salisbury's Ultimatum to Portugal to withdraw from disputed lands or face punitive action.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

## Cocoa in São Tomé

Under the decree promoted by the Marquis Sá da Bandeira in 1858, April 29th 1878 was established as the last day of slavery in Portugal's African colonies. After that, however, the practice more or less continued unhindered, at least in some of the colonies. While renamed as "contract labour" it was still effectively slavery. This was certainly the case on the islands of São Tomé e Príncipe, where slavery continued to be used for cocoa production, with slaves being purchased on the mainland and shipped out to the islands. The pretence that they were working under contract was based on their apparent verbal agreement, but none of them understood what they were agreeing to. They received no payment and before 1908 no slave was returned to Angola. As David Evans writes in the Society's 2014 Annual Report, this scandal eventually brought together an unlikely alliance of British and Portuguese humanitarians, protestant missionaries, Angolan freemasons and Quaker chocolate manufacturers, competing against a powerful lobby of wealthy São Tomé planters who enjoyed the support of the Portuguese authorities during both the Monarchy and the early years of the Republic. This "slave-grown cocoa", which received almost weekly coverage in both the Portuguese and British press, finally led in 1909 to a boycott of Portuguese cocoa by the Quaker-run British firms, Cadbury's, Rowntree's and Fry's.<sup>22</sup>

The first person to draw attention to the problem was the British journalist, Henry Nevinson, although his reporting initially had little impact because humanitarian attention was being devoted to the exploitation carried out by the Belgians in the Congo Free State. The planters in São Tomé responded to Nevinson's criticisms by arguing that their African workers signed on under their own free will and that the conditions under which recruitment was carried out in Angola were beyond the planters' control. However, he received support from the Portuguese side, with the colonial administrator, Judice Biker, writing in the *Revista Portuguesa Colonial e Marítima*, confirming that no workers had been repatriated and that beatings of the Africans were common. This was confirmed by José de Almeida, the future President of Portugal, who was then working as a plantation doctor in São Tomé.<sup>23</sup>

The first sign of concern on the part of the British Quaker chocolate manufacturers, who purchased over a third of São Tomé's cocoa, can be traced to 1901 when William Cadbury admitted he had been warned of what was going on in Angola and São Tomé. However, George Cadbury, the founder of Bournville, the model village for Cadbury's workers, had been a member of the Anti-Slavery Society since 1893 and must have already been familiar with the situation in both colonies. In 1906 Cadbury's sent Joseph Burt to São Tomé and the mainland, where he made a four-month trip into the interior of Angola, before visiting Mozambique. Away for almost two years, his report confirmed Nevinson's findings. Nevinson then decided that there had been enough time-wasting and in September, 1907 published an article called "The Angola Slave Trade" in the *Fortnightly Review*. He expressed the view that the only response was a boycott of Portuguese cocoa. However, the cocoa planters had powerful friends, including the Marquis of Soveral<sup>24</sup> in London and King D. Carlos in Lisbon, who dispatched Crown Prince Luís Filipe to São Tomé in July of 1907.<sup>25</sup>

William Cadbury eventually concluded that he had no choice other than to go to Africa to see the conditions for himself. As a consequence of his visit, Cadbury's, Fry's and Rowntree's announced on March 17th 1909 that they would no longer buy São Tomé cocoa. After a lecture tour of the United States

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<sup>22</sup> David Evans. *The Chocolate Makers and the "Abyss of Hell"*. BHSP Annual Report 41, 2014  
[https://www.bhsportugal.org/uploads/fotos\\_artigos/files/11\\_TheChocolateMakers\\_final.pdf](https://www.bhsportugal.org/uploads/fotos_artigos/files/11_TheChocolateMakers_final.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Paolo Lowndes Marques. *The Marquis of Soveral*. BHSP Annual Report 36, 2009

<sup>25</sup> Evans, *op cit*

by Joseph Burt and his wife later in that year at least six American manufacturing firms agreed to boycott cocoa from São Tomé.<sup>26</sup>

### **Britain and Portugal: Coming to terms with their slavery past?**

Britain has, until recently, been fairly successful in covering up its slave-trading and slave-owning past. While the name of William Wilberforce is known to many as the main promoter of the abolition of slavery, for most British people who care to think about it, slavery is associated with the cotton fields of the Deep South of the USA rather than with Britain. Yet the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 resulted in freedom being given to 800,000 Africans, who were mainly in the British Caribbean. The Act contained a provision for the financial compensation of the owners of slaves. £20m (£16bn in today's money) was set aside for this purpose, representing an amazing 40% of the total government expenditure for 1834. What is perhaps even more surprising is that slave owning was not the preserve of the wealthy few: 46,000 "owners" received compensation. With six or seven generations having passed since then, few of us can lack an ancestor who so benefitted. Perhaps needless to say, the slaves received nothing.<sup>27 28</sup>

It may not be so easy for descendants of slave-owning families to keep their skeletons locked in the cupboard in future. Records of the Slave Compensation Commission, which have been kept in the National Archives since the 1830s, are now being made available online.<sup>29</sup> Notable descendants of slave owners identified to date have included the writers George Orwell (Eric Blair) and Grahame Greene.<sup>30</sup>

While Britain has arguably been able to airbrush slavery out of its history, Portugal is still coming to terms with its slavery past and there has been significant recent controversy about to how to treat the topic. In 2017, the President of Portugal, on a visit to Senegal, went to one of the departure points for slaves. While he noted that Portugal had recognized the "injustice of slavery" when the Marquis de Pombal had abolished it within the country in 1761, he made no formal apology for Portugal's role, something that had earlier been done by Pope John Paul II and Brazilian President Lula da Silva. This led to complaints in Portugal by people who argued that the Portuguese inaccurately believed that their colonialism was more about exploration (the "Age of Discovery") than exploitation, and was more benevolent than that of other European countries. Defenders of Portugal's past, on the other hand, argued that most slaves were shipped between Angola and Brazil after Brazilian independence and, at least in the later stages, mainly involved Brazilian traders. In late 2017, Lisbon residents voted for a monument to be built on a quayside where slave ships once unloaded. This reignited the disagreements, with some arguing that relatively few slaves passed through Lisbon and a monument would be an example of political correctness by exaggerating Portugal's role in the slave trade and distorting its colonial history.<sup>31 32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> The Guardian *op cit*. (The person who received the largest payout was the father of the future British Prime Minister, W.E. Gladstone)

<sup>28</sup> Incidentally, Queen Victoria instructed Parliament to compensate Portugal for the loss of trade when slavery was formally abolished. However, the compensation was criticised by Queen Maria II in letters to her English cousin for paying "too little for too great a loss". Isabel Stilwell, 2019. *Maria II, The extraordinary friendship of Maria and Victoria, two queens in a world of men*. Livros Horizonte, Lisbon.

<sup>29</sup> <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C13808>. See also <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/search/>

<sup>30</sup> The Guardian, *op cit*

<sup>31</sup> Politico, *op cit*

<sup>32</sup> BBC News. *Slavery memorial highlights Portugal's racism taboo*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44965631>