

## The wrongs of Africa

‘A SHIP IS WORSE THAN A GAOL. There is, in a gaol, better air, better company, better conveniency of every kind; and a ship has the additional disadvantage of being in danger,’ opined the sagacious Doctor Johnson. ‘When men come to like a sea-life, they are not fit to live on land. Men go to sea before they know the unhappiness of that way of life; and when they have come to know it, they cannot escape from it, because it is then too late to choose another profession; as indeed is generally the case with men, when they have once engaged in any particular way of life.’

If the corpulent doctor had visited Liverpool his opinions would certainly have remained unchanged. Shipboard conditions were so bad that naval officers sent their sons to sea in their early teens knowing that the youngsters would rebel against the life if they were left another few years before being packed off to the navy, and it was not unknown for prisoners to be taken from the jails to man the ships in times of war. Neither the Merchant Navy nor the Royal Navy was able to recruit all the men they needed and ships’ complements were raised to the required quotas by the dreaded ‘press gang’, whose strong-arm tactics were actually sanctioned by law. At the outbreak of the Seven Years War with France, Liverpool Council offered a handsome bounty of two guineas (£2 2s.) to every man who volunteered for service on board a ship of war. This brought an inadequate response and the bribe was raised to three guineas. It was still not enough and the press gang, with the backing of the mayor, was given a warrant to go through the town and impress any men they could find to man the king’s ships.

In 1758 and 1759 Though Thurot, a brilliant French privateer, sailed into the Irish Sea and caused so much alarm that fortifications were built on the Mersey in anticipation of an attack. Privateers like Thurot were commanders of privately owned vessels which had a government licence to attack enemy ships in time of war. Liverpool, too, had many privateers, of which the most successful and best known were Fortunatus Wright, with his Mediterranean exploits, and his pupil William Hutchinson who later became Dock Master at Liverpool.

Privateers occasionally appear on samples of Liverpool pottery, one example being the *Golden Lion* which had previously been a French man-of-war and which was converted to a Greenland whaler. The more fortunate privateers could become rich overnight on their prize money. The classic case was Peter Baker who risked his whole fortune on a leaky vessel called the *Mentor* but somehow managed to capture the *Carnatic*, a French East Indiaman loaded with spices

and diamonds, which turned out to be worth the staggering sum of £135,000. Baker became so wealthy that he was able to purchase the manor of Garston out of his prize money.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of the Seven Years War the great profits made from privateering meant that the expansion of trade was hardly checked at all, and towards the end of the eighteenth century Liverpool was dominating the Atlantic trade and also profiting from the improvements in transport and manufacturing which were being brought about by the Industrial Revolution.

By 1800 Liverpool’s population outnumbered that of Bristol and its registered tonnage of shipping was third after London and Newcastle. It had become the main supply port for all the rapidly expanding industries of Lancashire.

At the lower end of the social scale, however, there was no security of employment for the sailors or the casual dock workers and Liverpool suffered from all the problems of violence, drunkenness and poverty that accompanied a large sea port. When times were bad, the sailors had to fall back on charity to subsist and it seems that some of them preferred this existence to that of signing on for a new voyage.

In the 1770s the American War of Independence brought about the only slump in the steadily increasing volume of trade into the

port of Liverpool; during the war the figures quoted for the volume of shipping showed a decrease from 84,792 to 79,450 tons. This decrease of under seven per cent generated several thousand unemployed sailors trying to exist with no income, and things became so desperate that the sailors rioted and held the town to ransom for several days before the military could be brought in to restore order. Cannon were brought into the streets and according to some sources they were used against the rioters and lives were lost in the cause.<sup>2</sup> The unemployment problem was short-lived, however, and only a few years later bounties of two guineas were being offered to able seamen and one guinea to ordinary seamen who volunteered for active service against the Americans. The bounties were increased to the considerable sums of ten guineas and five guineas, but ships could still not be manned without the efforts of the press gang.<sup>3</sup>

There was one particular trade in which the sufferings of the seamen were as nothing

The Slave Trade 1771. A page from Enfield’s *History*, showing all the ships which sailed from Liverpool to Africa in 1771, with their names and the number of slaves transported – over 28,000 in all. The table also gives a good indication of the places in Africa where the slaves were bought.



compared to the sufferings of the cargo. It was of course the African slave trade, which has always been traditionally assumed to be the most profitable trade of all. William Roscoe wondered at the morality of the wealth which had been accumulated at the expense of so much human suffering:

Ah! why, ye Sons of Wealth, with ceaseless toil,  
Add gold to gold, and swell the shining pile?  
Your general course to happiness ye bend,  
Why then to gain the means neglect the end? <sup>4</sup>

In the seventeenth century Liverpool played virtually no part in the slave trade, which at that time was the monopoly of the Royal African Company and was operated exclusively from London. The monopoly ended in 1698 and the first port seriously to challenge London for a share of the market was Bristol, where the merchants were so successful that within twenty years they had usurped London as the leading exponents. For two decades from the 1720s to the early 1740s Bristol dominated the African trade and at one time more than half of the slavers sailing from England were Bristol vessels. By the latter half of the eighteenth century, however, the Liverpool traffic had increased so rapidly that the northern port was unchallenged as the leading participant in the slave trade.

The earliest record of a slaving vessel trading from Liverpool appears in the Norris papers of 1700, when the captain of the good ship *Blessing* received his orders from the Norris family:

We order you with the first fair wind and weather that presents to make the best of the way to King-sail [Kinsale] in the kingdom of Ireland where apply yourself to Mr Arthur Izeik merchant there, who will ship on board you such necessary provisions and other necessaries you shall want for your intended voyage and ... with the first fair wind and weather make the best of your way to the Coast of Guinea ... where dispose of what of the cargo is most proper and purchase what slaves you can ... I hope you will slave your ship easy and what shall remain over as above slaving your ship lay out in teeth which are there reasonable – when you have disposed of your cargo and slaved your ship make the best of your way to the West Indies ... if you find the markets reasonable good sell there, if dull go down Leeward to such Island as you shall see convenient where dispose of

Some have claimed – or perhaps assumed – that the chained figures around the Nelson monument on the Exchange Flags represent slaves. As William Roscoe, the prominent anti-slavery campaigner, was one of the largest contributors to the public subscription which paid for the monument, it is possible that the design of the figures, which to some extent Roscoe influenced, was intended also in invoke the servitude of slavery. In truth, however, the figures relate directly the the Napoleonic wars, each one representing a prisoner of war from one of Nelson's victories: St Vincent, the Nile, Copenhagen and Trafalgar. During the Napoleonic wars up to 4,000 French prisoners of war were held in Liverpool, and this must have seemed an appropriate manner in which to commemorate the great man. The 25-foot high bronze monument was designed by Matthew Coates Wyatt (1777–1862) and sculpted by Richard Westmacott (1775–1856). It was unveiled in October 1813. This photograph was taken in 2001, since which time the figures have been removed for conservation and returned to their site.

PHOTOGRAPH: CARNEGIE

your negroes to our best advantage and with the produce load your ship with sugar, cottons, ginger if to be had ... and make the best of your way home ... but call at King-sail for orders ... read over your invoice frequently that you may be better acquainted with your goods, we have not limited you to any place, only if you can't do your business on the Gold Coast and Wida go to Angola your ship we think not proper to go into Byte. We leave the whole management of the concern to you and hope the Lord will direct you for the best. Be very cautious of speaking with any ship at sea for the seas are dangerous. Endeavour to keep all your men sober for intemperance in the hot country may destroy your men and so ruin your voyage. Let everything be managed to our best advantage, let nothing be embezzled. We commit you to the care and the protection of the Almighty, who we hope will preserve you from all danger and crown all of our endeavours with success to bring you home with safety which shall be the constant prayer of ...

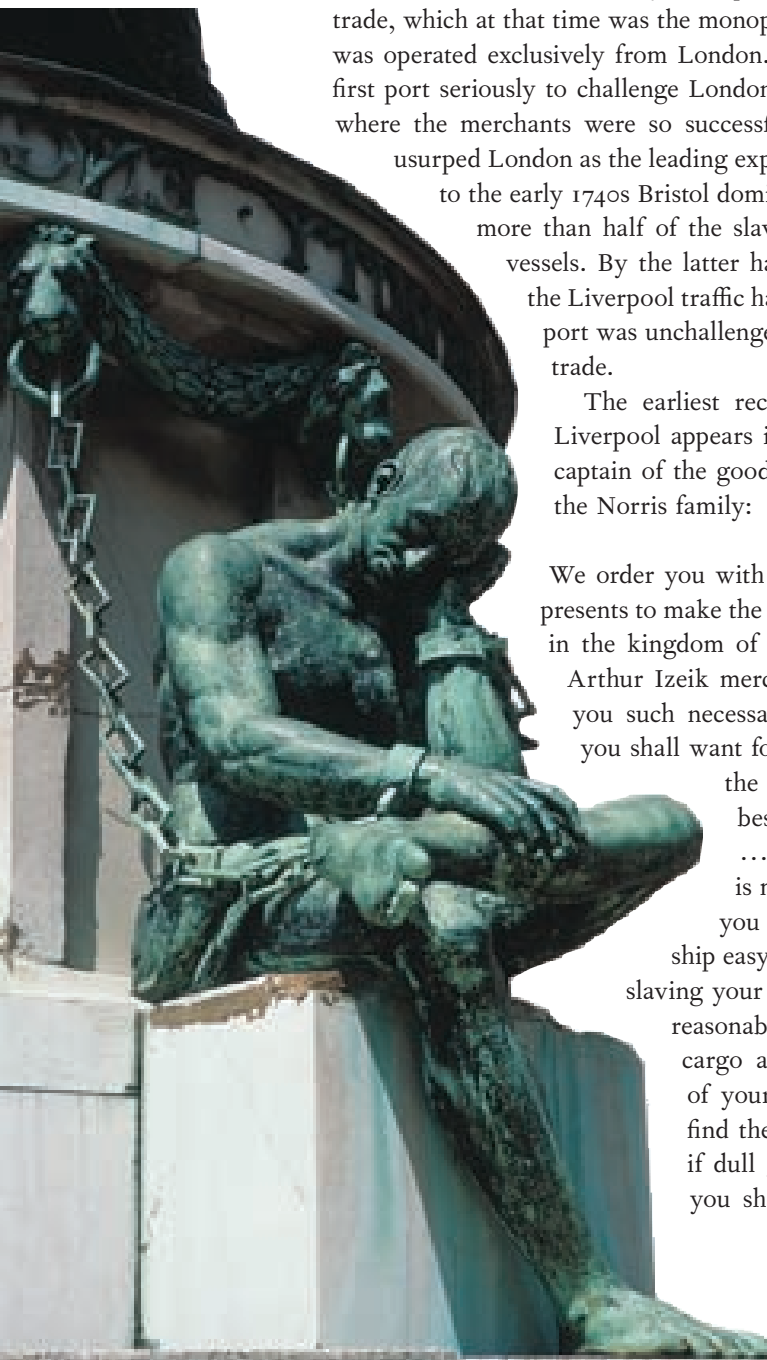
Write from all places where you have convenience of sending.<sup>5</sup>

The slave route was a triangular operation, with ships sailing first for Africa with a cargo of pots and pans and other manufactured items such as alcohol, tobacco, cloth, firearms, gunpowder and metal bars. These items were seldom new wares, but usually second-hand goods picked up at the market stalls. The African dealers inspected the pans for holes before exchanging them for slaves. The slaves were captured by dealers in Africa who brought them down to the slaving ships already in chains, sometimes walking in a long procession down the road to the coast, sometimes shackled in a large canoe which brought them down river from the interior. Occasionally a ship would carry only a handful of slaves, but the larger vessels packed hundreds of negroes into the hold, manacled together in appalling squalor and with hardly space to move and breathe. There followed the horrific middle passage across the Atlantic:

Deep freighted now with human merchandize,  
The vessel quits the shore; prepar'd to meet  
The storms, and dangers, of th' Atlantick main;  
Her motion scarce observ'd, save when the flood  
In frequent murmurs beats against her prow,  
Whilst groans and loud laments, and scalding tears,  
Mark'd the keen pangs of others. – Female shrieks,  
At intervals, in dreadful concert heard,  
To wild distraction manly sorrow turn'd;  
And ineffectual, o'er their heedless limbs,  
Was wav'd the wiry whip, that dropp'd with blood.<sup>6</sup>

The conditions of the slaves are described by John Newton, the captain of a slaving vessel:

The cargo of a vessel of a hundred tons, or little more, is calculated to purchase from two hundred and twenty to two hundred and fifty Slaves ...



the Slaves lie in two rows, one above the other, on each side of the ship, close to each other, like books on a shelf. I have known them so close, that the shelf would not easily contain one more ... 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 attempt either to rise or to lie down, without hurting themselves or each other ... The heat and smell of these rooms, when the weather will not admit of the slaves being brought upon deck, and of having their rooms cleaned every day, would be almost unsupportable to a person not accustomed to them ... They are kept down by the weather to breathe a hot and corrupted air, sometimes for a week; this, added to the galling of their irons, and the despondency which seizes their spirits when thus continued, soon becomes fatal. And every morning perhaps, more instances than one are found, of the living and the dead, like the Captives of Mezentius, fastened together.<sup>7</sup>

*'Whene're to  
Afric's shores I  
turn my eyes,  
Horrors of deepest,  
deadliest guilt  
arise.'*

HANNAH MORE

The time taken to complete the middle passage varied greatly with wind and weather, but the average time spent in these atrocious conditions of human suffering was between fifty and sixty days. Lack of exercise, poor diet and the squalid, insanitary conditions meant that many negroes died on the passage. Figures available for the later decades show a mean mortality rate of 5.65 per cent, but some voyages were far worse than this and it may be assumed that earlier in the century, before the ships were obliged to carry a surgeon, the death rate was far higher and commonly reached ten to twenty per cent.

The negroes were bound for the sugar plantations of the West Indies or for the southern colonies of America, where they were sold as slaves to the plantation owners. The ship was then loaded with sugar, rum, and mahogany in the West Indies, or with tobacco if the voyage was to Virginia, and the new cargo was transported back to England on the third and final leg of the voyage.

There were profits to be made on each of the three legs and it has therefore always been generally assumed that the slave trade was a highly profitable concern. It is certainly difficult to justify why such high risks would be taken for a low return on investment and the accounts of William Davenport of Liverpool survive to show that he made a staggering gross profit of £28,332 on two voyages of the slaver *Hawke* in the years 1779 and 1780. This figure reduces to £14,803 after allowing for insurance, repair bills and other expenses, still leaving a net profit of over one hundred per cent on the original investment of £13,502. We now discover, however, that the profits from the *Hawke* were quite exceptional and that these two voyages were the most successful ever financed by William Davenport in his 25 years as a slaver. We also know that many slavers, unlike the *Hawke*, did not carry cargo on all three legs of the 'triangle'.

Davenport traded with two towns in the Gulf of Guinea. One was Old Calabar near the mouth of the River Niger and the other was Cameroon about fifty miles to the east. His mean profits over a quarter of a century of human suffering were 7 per cent on 37 voyages to Old Calabar and 21.9 per cent on 26 voyages to the

*'Yet whence these  
horrors? This  
inhuman rage,  
That brands with  
blackest infamy  
the age?  
Is it, our varied  
interests disagree,  
And Britain sinks  
if Afric's sons be  
free?'*

WILLIAM ROSCOE



A Liverpool slave ship, c.1780, painted by William Jackson. There is little to differentiate the ship from many other three-masted square-riggeers of the time, but this is the only known picture of a Liverpool slaver. There is much activity aboard, with many people on deck. The gunwales and the bow seem to be richly decorated.

NATIONAL GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS ON MERSEYSIDE

coast of Cameroon. Davenport was an experienced and very typical trader and it seems, therefore, that the profits of the trade in general were no better than other more traditional forms of trading. In the latter half of the century a hundred slavers a year would make the triangular passage to Africa and the West Indies, representing only about five per cent of the tonnage leaving Liverpool.<sup>8</sup>

The merchants were comfortable, well-fed, middle-class citizens; they were burgesses of Liverpool. They developed a reassuring air and never lost an opportunity to say that, while there were certainly a few rogues in their trade, they were honest dealers who never abused their slaves and always employed surgeons on their ships for the welfare of the slaves. Nearly all were practising Christians and had no problem about reconciling their faith with their business. They claimed to be saving souls from a life of ignorance in the African bush and to be introducing them to the Christian faith. In the few cases where the merchants kept black servants they invariably treated them well for all the world to see. The merchants seldom left England; they never ventured within a thousand miles of the middle passage and the unpleasant side of their business was performed by their employees, the captains of the slaving vessels and the sailors whose job it was to man the ships. A few merchants had been to the Gold Coast and parts of Africa where the slaves were procured. Friendly business correspondence survives between the Liverpool merchants and the dealers in Africa. There are even cases of the African dealers' children being shipped to Liverpool for their education. It was seen as a perfectly respectable trade.

To put the trade in the context of the times, it is only fair to point out the

