

Understanding Slavery Initiative

Emancipation

Following a lull after the passing of the Slave Trade Act 1807, the movement towards full emancipation of enslaved Africans by Britain forged ahead. Many abolitions held meetings to discuss the next steps – one such meeting was attended by 2,000 supporters. Despite long-running disagreements between those seeking immediate emancipation and others looking for a more gradual solution, most attendees demanded an immediate end to the slavery system. The committee was a breakaway group from the Quakers' London Society for the Abolishing the State of Slavery throughout the British Dominions. It was created to build up the movement, and soon there were 1,200 local societies. Hundreds of thousands of signatures found their way on to petitions.

Further coercion

The Abolition of Slavery Act, passed in August 1833, was scheduled to come into force in August the following year. The success in having it finally reach the statute books was not entirely due to slave rebellions, grass-roots petitioning and the logistics of military control. The profit motive also had a large bearing.

From the beginning of the abolition movement, its parliamentary supporters had been reassuring planters that emancipation would not affect their labour supply. The promise was held out that those emancipated would remain under some coercion. Vagrancy laws were proposed under which any former slave attempting to leave a plantation would be penalised, and land ownership beyond the range of garden plots would be illegal. There was also to be a period of 'apprenticeship' (in the Act's final draft, a six-year term was agreed on) during which planters had the right to the continuing labour of their ex-slaves.

Compensation

The planters were further appeased by the offer of £20 million worth of compensation (nearly £1 billion in today's money). The emancipation law, from this perspective, was a moderate measure in that it compensated not the slaves, who had built up the wealth of Britain and its colonies through centuries of unpaid labour, but their former owners.

But the lavish compensation paid out to the latter failed to find its way back into developing West Indian island economies. Rather than using these funds to facilitate an effective transition from slavery to free labour, the planters invested them in the British bond and property markets.

Emancipated – but not free

Emancipation Day – Friday, 1 August 1834 – was celebrated throughout the British Caribbean at chapels, churches and government-sanctioned festivals, some of which were held under the watchful eyes of hundreds of extra troops. The previously enslaved populations also awoke to a fresh set of concerns.

A new raft of law-and-order measures had been introduced. Under the new 'apprenticeships', newly 'freed' people were still expected to remain on the plantations and put in 10-hour days. Absenteeism would result in imprisonment in one of the many new jails (equipped with treadmills) that were being built to contain recalcitrant workers. Additional tiers of 'special officers' and stipendiary magistrates were created to police the changes. 'Apprentices' could still be flogged without redress, females included.

The apprenticeship scheme would come to an end only in 1838, after the Anti-Slavery Society, following an inspection tour of the West Indian colonies in 1836, had produced another barrage of pamphlets and petitions.

Economic decline

The effects of emancipation in the British West Indies varied from island to island, but the plantation economy declined overall. Yearly sugar production slumped by 36% between 1839 and 1846, but as output dropped, the price of sugar rose and 50% of the Jamaican plantations went out of business. In Trinidad and British Guyana over the next 30 years, the newly freed slaves initiated a series of large-scale strikes. As a result, local planters and government officials imported 96,850 indentured labourers from the Indian subcontinent.

The most positive result of emancipation was the growth of a class of independent Black traders and craftspeople. By 1844, there were 2,500 individuals in this class in Antigua, 6,000 in British Guyana, 12,000 in Barbados and 17,500 in Jamaica.

Policing slavery

In the wake of emancipation, the British government sought to present itself as a roving anti-slavery watchdog. But the ongoing mission to suppress slavery on a global scale also permitted them to monitor the naval ambitions of other European powers. The policing of slavery on the west coast of Africa coincided with a heightening of European interest in the African interior.

The main instrument of this new policy was the British West Africa Squadron. This force of six old ships was unable to monitor the entire coast from Angola to the Cape Verde Islands – the only areas that could be effectively watched were Benin and Sierra Leone. Lord

Palmerston once remarked: 'If there was a particularly old, slow-going tub in the navy, she was sure to be sent to the coast of Africa to try and catch the fast-sailing American clippers.'

There was another problem: only vessels actually carrying slaves could be stopped. Even a ship entering a port with the express intention of slaving was beyond the law.

When African captives were found aboard ships and released, as 35,000 were in the 1830s, the majority ended up being sent to labour in Freetown in Sierra Leone, while the rest consented to travel to the British Caribbean as 'apprentices'.

Expansionism and patriotism

Some aspects of abolitionism and emancipation dovetailed neatly with expansionist policies and patriotic sentiment. Those like Thomas Buxton were keen to see the regeneration of Africa primarily through a series of trading posts along the River Niger. Buxton's ideas, as laid out in his 1838 book *The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy*, quickly gained acceptance among members of the establishment who foresaw the coming of an Africa colonised and controlled by Europeans, though without slavery.

In the wake of abolition, Britain intervened more directly, establishing its first colonies in West Africa: Sierra Leone and then Lagos. This marked the beginning of what would become, by the end of the century, the 'Scramble for Africa' – the struggle among European powers to colonise and dominate the continent.

The British carried their new morality with the goods they traded. The abolitionist campaign was taken into the heart of Africa, and gunboat diplomacy was used to encourage African rulers to end the slave trade in their own dominions.

You can find [artefacts](#) in the theme of [Emancipation](#).
