

London, Sugar & Slavery

Gallery introduction script for KS2/3 teachers

Summary

Before starting please read through this full guide and script. It's designed to support your delivery of the introduction to the London, Sugar & Slavery gallery.

The key points to know:

- The aim is to prepare pupils to engage thoughtfully and respectfully with the gallery content.
- Start outside the museum to introduce the building's history and its connection to the British trade in enslaved Africans.
- Move to the gallery entrance, where you'll introduce the gallery and its themes.
- Deliver to small groups if possible (around 15 pupils), but adapt as needed.
- Ask the reflective questions included in the script to encourage pupil engagement.
- We have included stretch thinking questions for key stage 3.
- The museum uses the term 'enslaved people' rather than 'slaves' to recognise the humanity of the men, women and children who were taken from their homes and forced to work.
- Be mindful of space inside the entrance area as it's a through route for other visitors.

This script helps pupils understand:

How London's docks and warehouses were part of Britain's history of trade.

That sugar and some of the goods traded at the docks were made by enslaved African people.

That this work was forced and unfair and helped make London rich.

Why we use respectful words to talk about this history.

How people resisted and worked to bring slavery to an end.

Using the stretch thinking questions:

These are designed to extend key stage 3 students' critical thinking.

These don't need to be answered then and there, students can find answers as they explore the gallery.

Outside the building

Right now, we're standing outside London Museum Docklands.

This building was built in 1802 as a warehouse.

Has anyone been to a warehouse before?

[Pause for answers]

A warehouse is a place where goods and products are stored.



View of the outside of the museum building today

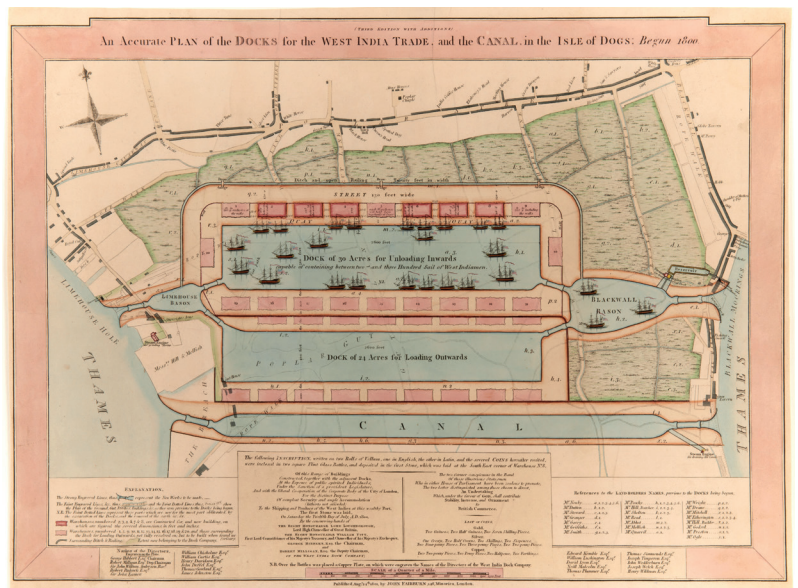
Original building

Originally, nine warehouses stretched all the way along the quayside (to where Billingsgate Market is now) making this the biggest commercial building project in the world at the time.

You can still see water in front of the building now – but there used to be a lot more of it, and it was full of ships.

Goods were brought from across the world to Britain on ships. Goods like tea, sugar, coffee, cotton, spices, silk, bananas, oranges and other foods.

When they arrived, they were unloaded onto the dockside and then hoisted or carried into the warehouses to be tested, sorted and stored for a short time.



Plan of the West India docks, 1800

London, Sugar & Slavery

This particular warehouse was called No.1 Warehouse. It is now one third of the original warehouse building. It was used to store sugar and rum (which is made of molasses, which comes from sugar).



Sugar sacks hung along the exterior wall of the sugar warehouses at West India dock, c1925-c1935

Windows

Look up at the building. Do you notice that there are bars on the windows? The bars were there to stop people from breaking in and stealing the sugar!

Before the docks and warehouses were built, lots of goods would get stolen from ships. When ships became bigger and bigger, with more and more goods on them that were more and more valuable, the people who owned the goods wanted to have better protections against theft. This is one of the reasons these warehouses were built in the first place.

Where do you think the sugar that was stored here came from?

[Pause for answers]

This sugar came from the Caribbean.

Does anyone know the names of any Caribbean islands?



Close up view of the windows on the museum building

Caribbean



Some examples of Caribbean islands are: Jamaica, Antigua, Trinidad & Tobago, Saint Kitts, Barbados, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent & the Grenadines, Dominica, Martinique, Montserrat. There are more than 700 islands in the Caribbean!

This brings us to the reason there is a gallery called London, Sugar & Slavery in this museum.

Although slavery was never widespread here in Britain, the sugar which was once stored in this warehouse was grown, harvested and produced by enslaved African people on islands in the Caribbean. Those islands were ruled by Britain as part of the British Empire and the people who owned the plantations were often British.

Some of these British people were part of a company called the West India Dock Company, which built these warehouses and docks. West India, or the West Indies, was what people in Britain called the Caribbean back then.



KS3 stretch thinking

Who benefitted from this trade?

Who paid the price?

How did the empire benefit Britain?

Empty Plinth

In front of the building, there is now an empty plinth. This is not part of the museum. The plinth used to have a statue on it of a man called Robert Milligan. By the time of his death in 1809, he owned two sugar plantations in Jamaica and claimed ownership of 526 enslaved people. This statue was removed by the local authority in 2020 in response to a worldwide movement to remove statues which commemorate supporters of slavery.



The empty plinth in front of the museum

The text on the plinth mentions Milligan's contribution to building the docks, which is why the statue was there.

It does not mention anything about the enslaved people he claimed ownership of, nor those he bought in bulk from slave ships to sell to other enslavers.

Here at the museum, staff are open about the fact that this warehouse would have never been built if it wasn't for the goods that were being produced from enslaved labour.

KS3 stretch thinking

Why do you think some people wanted the statue of Robert Milligan removed, while others wanted it to stay?

On the way to the LSS gallery

We will now go inside and make our way to the London, Sugar & Slavery gallery but on the way there, we'll see some things about what it was like to work here when it was a warehouse. See if you can notice these things inside the building:

- the wooden pillars made of the trunks of pitch pine trees. They are on every floor of the building from the basement to the roof, keeping the building up in place of walls
- the sloping floor in the No.1 Warehouse gallery. This was to help move the imported goods from the front to the back of the building
- the large windows called loophole doors used by the dockers to load heavy goods into the warehouse.



View of the No.1 Warehouse gallery with sloping floor and loophole doors

KS3 stretch thinking

In what ways was this building part of a colonial system?

Introduction to LSS gallery

In this gallery, we will learn more about the British trade in enslaved Africans. We will find out how London benefitted from the trade and how it ended in the mid-19th century, just before Queen Victoria became queen. We'll also find out about the lives of enslaved African people.

Language

But first, did you notice that I didn't use the word 'slaves' just then? What words did I use instead?

[Pause for answers]

Instead of saying 'slaves', I said 'enslaved Africans'. That's really important and you'll see those words in the gallery.

The museum uses those words to make sure that visitors know that the people we are talking about in this gallery were people and not property, which is how they were seen by some people at the time.

They were people who had been forcibly taken from their homes in Africa. At that time, Africa was made up of lots of kingdoms. Some of these were very, very rich.

KS3 stretch thinking

Why does it matter what language we use when we talk about the past?

The British trade in enslaved Africans

After they had been taken from their homes, enslaved Africans were transported to the Caribbean on ships. There, they were sold as if they were property and forced to work on the plantations. This was horrible, hard work. If they had children when they were enslaved, their children would automatically be enslaved too.

The British trade in enslaved Africans happened over a time period of 400 years – from the middle of the 1400s until the 1800s. During this time people were taken from their homes in African countries and transported to parts of the British Empire.

The British Empire is a term used to describe the places around the world that Britain claimed to 'own'.

Most enslaved Africans were taken to the Caribbean islands that we mentioned earlier.



The gallery entrance



Image of a display in the gallery showing the trade route



KS3 stretch thinking

How did slavery support the growth of the British Empire?

Sugar plantations

People living in London and the rest of Britain were able to buy products like sugar, silks and cotton from across the British Empire and beyond. But these goods took a lot of work to produce and many people were needed to help grow them.

So, enslaved African people were taken to the plantations on the Caribbean islands to provide free labour.

There, the plantation owners didn't pay the enslaved people anything for their work. They were treated awfully, disrespectfully and brutally. The plantation owners made huge profits selling the goods that the people they had enslaved had worked hard to produce.

Britain was not the only country involved in enslaving Africans, many other European nations (like Spain, Portugal, France and the Netherlands) enslaved people as well. However, by the early 1700s, Britain was most involved.



A display of objects showing how goods produced by enslaved Africans were used in Britain



KS3 stretch thinking

Look at the objects and information on display to find out what industries grew due to slavery?

Abolition

We can't be sure how many people were enslaved over the 400 years, but we think it's between 12-15 million people.

Officially, the slave trade was abolished in Britain in 1807, but slavery was not abolished until 1833. There was an abolitionist movement of people who recognised that enslavement was unjust and they fought to end it.

Some of the people who fought for abolition were previously enslaved Africans.

Turn to the person next to you and discuss:

What do you think unjust means?

[Pause for answers]

Unjust means something which is wrong and unfair.

People who wanted to end enslavement often boycotted (or refused to buy or use) goods that were a product of the trade in enslaved Africans. Towards the end of this gallery, you can see examples of the things they made, used and sold to encourage others to support them.

One of these people was Mary Prince - a former enslaved woman who wrote her autobiography and became the first woman in Britain to petition Parliament (write them a letter asking them to do something).

Now, it's time for us to look around the gallery in small groups.



A display in the gallery showing people who gave first hand testimony of their experiences



KS3 stretch thinking

How significant was the role of formerly enslaved people like Mary Prince in the fight to end slavery?