

BBC Bitesize GCSE History – The British Empire

Episode 5 – The Transatlantic Slave Trade

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Datshiane: I'm Datshiane Navanayagam.

Katie: And I'm Katie Charlwood, and this is BBC Bitesize GCSE History.

Datshiane: This is the fifth episode in an eight-part series on the British Empire.

Katie: Throughout the series, we are looking at the key moments in the development of the British Empire.

Datshiane: In this episode, we're going to look at the transatlantic slave trade, the human impact and how Britain became very wealthy from slavery.

Katie: This episode will include descriptions of violence, exploitations and the inhumane conditions endured by enslaved people. We recognise that these subjects can be distressing and may be difficult to hear. Please, take care of your emotional wellbeing and feel free to pause or even step away if you need to, or speak with someone you trust.

Datshiane: So Katie, give us the who, what and where background to Britain's involvement in the slave trade.

Katie: Okay, this began from the 1560s, when British sailors and merchants sought to profit from lucrative trade around the world. Merchants started attacking and stealing from other ships. But from the 1600s, Britain began to set up colonies, settling the land and displacing indigenous populations, developing huge farms called plantations, where high profit crops like sugar, cotton and tobacco were grown.

Datshiane: These crops were labour intensive, which means they needed large numbers of people to do the hard work of farming them to make profits. Initially, indentured servants were used.

Katie: See, indentured servants were people who worked for someone else until they had paid back a debt.

Datshiane: But using indentured servants would still have eaten into their profits, and so they turned to the slave trade, which was expanding, and slavery was seen as a more profitable solution.

Katie: This was the transatlantic slave trade. It was the forced enslavement and movement of people from Africa to the Americas.

Datshiane: In fact, the transatlantic slave trade became the largest forced migration in history.

Katie: And in 1619, the first enslaved Africans were forcibly seized and brought to the British colony of Virginia in North America. Enslaved Africans were bought outright by plantation owners.

Datshiane: They had no legal rights, and they had to work their whole lives without payment. Many enslaved people died of exhaustion, injury or disease. And any children born became the slave owner's property too. This is known as chattel slavery.

Katie: And it wasn't just North America where new colonies were set up, merchants started attacking and stealing from other ships. But from the 1600s, Britain began to setup colonies in North America and the Caribbean, settling the land and displacing indigenous populations. In 1661, the Barbados Slave Code was set into law, which was established in the British colony. This defined the status of enslaved people, it granted the owners absolute power, while denying basic rights to enslaved people themselves.

Datshiane: And the slave trade was highly profitable, with traders making millions of pounds. Three British port cities grew wealthy from the slave trade: Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow.

Katie: Up until 1800, around twelve to fifteen million Africans were forcibly taken across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas and the Caribbean, although some historians suggest that the figure could've been even higher.

Datshiane: Enslaved people endured short and terrible lives of extreme misery and brutal punishment for resisting or disobeying their enslavers.

Katie: And their families were often separated and had no legal rights.

Datshiane: The dehumanising treatment, the extreme working conditions and the long hours and barbaric punishments meant that the life expectancy of enslaved Africans was only twenty-six years.

Katie: Africans were captured mainly on the West African coast, particularly from areas such as modern day Ghana and Nigeria. And the European traders exchanged goods such as guns, alcohol and textiles for enslaved people. The words of Olaudah Equiano, who was kidnapped and sold into slavery, capture the unimaginable despair. He wrote that, 'The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, renders the whole a scene of horror, almost inconceivable.'

Datshiane: Once captured in West Africa, enslaved Africans were packed tightly into ships, facing brutal conditions, disease and abuse. It's estimated that around fifteen to twenty per cent, around over two million of them, did not survive the voyage, which is known as the Middle Passage.

Katie: The three-part trading journey was known as the slave triangle. Enslaved Africans were taken to the Americas and the Caribbean. Then raw materials like sugar, cotton and tobacco were taken back to Britain and Europe. And then, manufactured goods and luxuries were taken to the west coast of Africa to exchange for enslaved people to be taken to the Americas. Of course, those who benefitted were vastly outnumbered by enslaved people,

who endured appalling conditions. Their families were often separated and enslaved people had no legal rights.

Datshiane: There's lots of serious and difficult history to take on here, so feel free to pause if you need to digest or discuss this with friends or teachers.

Katie: We heard some words of Olaudah Equiano, who was enslaved, and his autobiography, 'The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano', written in 1789, helped readers to humanise enslaved Africans and challenge racist ideas about African people, as it was one of the first personal accounts of slavery written by someone who had experienced it directly.

Datshiane: Here's an example quote from Olaudah Equiano and his book, which might be useful to use as a primary source in an exam question. 'I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life... I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat... I now wished for the last friend, Death, to relieve me.'

Katie: Olaudah Equiano's words might be useful to consider, as they reflect the experiences of enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage. Have a think about why his account's considered valuable primary source for understanding the slave trade.

Datshiane: As always, use your knowledge of these events, and think about the content and reliability of the source to make a judgement as to how useful it is. Or listen back to the exam skill series for some tips.

Katie: There had always been resistance to the slave trade in Africa, during the Middle Passage and on the plantations.

Datshiane: Exactly, there are numerous recorded revolts on slave ships, where captives tried to overthrow the crew, though these were mostly unsuccessful.

Katie: And on the plantations, enslaved people resisted by working slowly, sabotaging equipment, maintaining cultural practices, or pretending to be sick, or run away.

Datshiane: And there were many organised revolts and uprisings in the Caribbean, including the Maroons in Jamaica, who escaped their plantations in 1655. They set up independent communities in remote areas resisting recapture. You can find more details on this and other revolts on the Bitesize website.

Katie: In Britain, many members of parliament were involved in and profited from the slave trade. Many of them were opposed to the abolition of slavery, but from the 1770s in Britain, a growing abolitionist movement emerged.

Datshiane: It included prominent members of parliament, including William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson. They travelled the country to raise awareness of the horrific experiences and spread the abolitionist message.

Katie: In 1807, the British Parliament passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, which banned the transatlantic slave trade, but did not end slavery itself. That didn't happen until 1833, when the Slavery Abolition Act was passed. This finally led to the emancipation of enslaved people in the British Empire.

Datshiane: Despite the abolition of slavery, and the horrors of the trade, it was the slave owners who demanded compensation from the British government, using taxpayers' money for the loss of what they felt was their labour force.

Katie: The slave owners got their way in that the Abolition Act of 1833 did recognise enslaved people were property of the slave owners and they would be compensated with cash payments under what was called the apprenticeship system.

Datshiane: Katie, explain the apprenticeship system.

Katie: Okay, so, the apprenticeship system is where former enslaved people were required to work for their former masters for a set number of years, usually between four and six years, in return for a small wage. But they continued to suffer poor conditions and exploitation.

Datshiane: This continued exploitation and injustices of black people in Jamaica led to the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865, which was headed by a preacher, Paul Bogle. It was brutally suppressed by the British.

Katie: See, Paul Bogle preached a political vision to his congregation demanding better and more equal treatment. A day before the rebellion in 1865, he wrote a petition which was published in the London Gazette. Bogle's letter of 1865 spoke of 'the mean advantages that have been taken of us.' They asked for the rights of law they believed they were due, promising that otherwise 'we will be compelled to put our shoulders to the wheels, as we have been imposed upon ... for 27 years,' since 1838, when apprenticeship came to an end.

Datshiane: You can find out more about Paul Bogle and the Morant Bay Rebellion on the BBC Bitesize website. Now, the abolition of slavery was a significant moment in history. Have a think about what some of the immediate effects were and write them down in your revision notes.

Katie: So, these would include the freedom of the enslaved people themselves, but there were also economic ones as previously enslaved individuals struggled to find stable work, and it also forced landowners to find new labour systems. And social consequences, as even after slavery was abolished, formerly enslaved people and their descendants faced systemic racism and social exclusion.

Datshiane: Overall, slavery was central to the growth of the British Empire. The profits from the slave trade and plantation economies helped Britain become a global superpower, but the human cost of this wealth was humungous, as millions of Africans were forcibly enslaved and exploited.

Katie: As a result of the transatlantic slave trade, today millions of people of African descent live across the world. This is a part of what is known as the African diaspora.

Datshiane: There is loads more on this and other History topics on the Bitesize website, as well as in other episodes in this series. In the next episode, we'll be looking at colonisation in Africa. Thanks for listening.