



Bright city, dark secrets

Explore a dark past behind
present-day Bristol

Time: 90 mins

Distance: 1 ½ miles

Landscape: urban

Stroll through Bristol today and we'll see a vibrant city, home to Brunel's bridge, a natural gorge and contemporary street art renowned the world over. Yet behind Bristol's streets, buildings and bridges lay dark secrets.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Britain's slave traders transported over 3 million people. Some 500,000 enslaved Africans were carried on Bristol ships.

This trail explores a handful of the city's seemingly everyday sights to uncover how Bristol's slavery past still permeates life here 500 years on.

Location:

Bristol city centre

Start:

Guinea Street, BS1 6TJ

Finish:

The Georgian House Museum,
7 Great George Street, BS1 5RR

Grid reference:

ST 58816 72242

Thank you!



This trail is based on material from:

The Bristol Slave Trade Trail written by Madge Dresser, Caletta Jordan and Doreen Taylor,
published by Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, and
Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port
by Madge Dresser (2001)



Route and stopping points



- 01 Guinea Street
- 02 The Hole In The Wall pub, Queen Square
- 03 Pero's Bridge
- 04 NatWest bank, Corn Street
- 05 Colston Hall
- 06 The Georgian Museum, 7 Great George Sreet

01 Guinea Street

On looks alone this appears to be an unassuming street, winding its way from the waterfront. In the summer a beer garden spills out onto the cobbles from the homely looking pub. The scene seems to pose no unusual questions. The stories behind these two places though are at the heart of slavery in Bristol.

Guinea Street, with its row of 5-storey houses, was home to several renowned slave traders. The street's harbour side location was ideal for managing their day to day affairs. More intriguing however is how the street got its name.

Today, Guinea is a country in West Africa. In the early eighteenth century though, Westerners used this name for the whole of Africa's west coast. During this period, the London-based Royal African Company (RAC) held a Royal monopoly to trade with Africa for gold, ivory and enslaved people. The RAC symbol was an elephant with a castle on its back.

The 'Guinea' coin takes its name from the gold brought from the Guinea coast of Africa. Guineas were minted between 1663 and 1813, and some have a small elephant and castle below the Royal head, to show that the gold was from Africa via the RAC. The name of this street is therefore entwined with a region, a country, and coins that were all linked by prolific slave traders.

Now turn to look at the unusually-named Ostrich pub. The pub was built in 1745, named perhaps for the African bird that Europeans had known since the 13th century, or a corruption of a nearby area said to be known as Oyster Reach. Its position on the dockside probably made it a place where sailors congregated, making it ideal for the underhand recruiting of crews for slave ships.

Directions

Walk past the front of the pub and turn right to follow the harbour side right along until you reach a road bridge crossing the channel.

Walk up onto the bridge and turn left to follow it over the water. Go straight over the mini round about and stop on the Corner of Queen Square, just outside The Hole in the Wall pub.

02 The Hole in the Wall pub, Queen Square

Bristol harbour has been internationally significant since the thirteenth century, when it started trading with Europe and became the second biggest port after London. Like Liverpool further north, Bristol's west coast location made it a hub for boat building. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Bristol was one of England's most prolific ports.

Its size and its location encouraged the city's involvement in the 'triangular trade'. The 'slave triangle' saw enslaved men, women and children traded between three destinations – West Africa, the Americas and Europe. Very few enslaved Africans were brought ashore into Britain. Instead they were shipped from Africa to America and forced to work on extensive plantations across the Caribbean.

Bristol ships transported enslaved Africans across the Atlantic in filthy and brutal conditions. People taken against their will from their homelands were packed on-board like sardines, shackled together for hours, lying in their own faeces. They were often from different countries and cultural groups. They spoke different languages. Many had never seen the sea before, let alone a ship.

One man who made the journey was Olaudah Equiano. In 1789 he wrote an acclaimed autobiography, which described his journey as a slave: *"The shrieks of the women and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable"*.

The average loss of 'cargo' on slave ships was between ten and 20%, through sickness, suicide and even murder at the hands of the crew and captains. Even just ten percent means over 1,000,000 Africans died on board the ships, 20% represents over 2,000,000 deaths.

On the dock side of the Hole in the Wall pub you can still see the spy house, a room where a lookout could keep watch for press gangs. Press gangs operated for the Royal Navy, and 'impressed' men to join a Navy ship – basically the press gang kidnapped sailors, because the Navy was known as a hard employer and men didn't want to join up. Finding crew for slave ships was also difficult because of the high mortality rates on long slaving voyages.

There was also fear of rebellion from the enslaved – understandably so! Slave ship captains used other methods to recruit crews – local publicans helped to get men drunk and run up big debts, and the way to pay off the money owed was to sign up to a slaving voyage, or face the debtors' prison.

Beside the pub is Queens Square where many of Bristol's eighteenth century merchants lived. Completed in 1727, this grand square was built at the height of the slave trade. Today it is a testament to the great wealth of those who profited from it. Two buildings stand out and tell an insider's story of slavery.

To our left, Number 29 is one of the best-preserved original buildings. It was built in 1709 for Nathaniel Day, who went on to become the mayor of Bristol. He petitioned strongly against a proposed tax on enslaved 'property' - a demonstration of his vested interest in the business.

Across the square is the grand, columned Custom House. Every thriving port had one, but this building is a symbol of the sheer amount of 'custom' coming in and out of the city. The customs officers made sure ships arriving in the harbour paid the correct amount of taxes. This is where much of the wealth derived from the slave trade first entered Bristol's economy.

Directions

If you decide to explore Queen Square, ensure you end up at the corner to the left of where you first entered. Exit here and walk across the road to get to the cobbled Harbourside. In front of you is a distinctively curved bridge with two fog horn sculptures on it. Stop here.

03 Pero's Bridge

This modern bridge across the harbour may seem long removed from a history of slavery. Instead it's a modern monument that allows us to step towards the traumatic and often forgotten past of the enslaved themselves.

Bristolian merchants took thousands against their will from Africa to work on plantations in the Caribbean and Americas. Ship's officers were often allowed to buy 'privilege slaves' from the cargo for a reduced rate. They could then sell them for a profit in the Americas or keep them as personal servants. A small number – fewer than a thousand? – of enslaved men, women and children came to Bristol. Some were the 'privilege slaves' of ships' officers, others the personal servants of plantation owners who left the plantations and settled in Bristol.

One was a man called Pero Jones. In 1783 his master brought him from the Americas to live with him in Bristol. Relatively few enslaved people arrived in Britain, so Pero would have been very visible in the city. There is no evidence that Pero was ever freed, so despite the discussions and legal decisions on whether slavery could exist in England, he probably remained enslaved here until the day he died in 1798.

Pero's Bridge marks the entrance to the modern harbour side. It was dedicated in 1998, two centuries after Pero's death. A reminder of the city's history, the bridge also commemorates all those affected by the slave trade. Pero is now an 'ambassador' of Bristol's secretive past and the challenging legacy it left across the globe.

Directions

Cross over the bridge and turn right. Pass the harbour side cafes and bars. At the end of the path cross over the plaza turning left up Broad Quay – watch out for buses along this stretch. Follow this to the traffic lights on the corner of Baldwin Street. Cross at the lights choosing the pedestrianised road going diagonally up to your right – Clare Street. Continue up until this turns into the non-pedestrianised Corn Street. On the corner of Corn Street and St Nicholas Street which goes off to your right, you will see a large NatWest bank. Stop here.

04 NatWest bank (Old Bank), Corn Street

Look for a plaque commemorating the 'Old Bank'. This was one of the banks that eventually merged to become National Westminster, or NatWest Bank. What links this recognisable high street name with Bristol's dark trade?

Bristol's slave income wasn't just based around trading and shipping of people. The city profited from all of the businesses that went hand in hand with it.

During the mid-seventeenth century, glassworks and sugar refineries popped up across the city. Glass was used to transport brandy and rum, which was traded in West Africa in exchange for enslaved Africans.

Many of these enslaved men, women and children toiled on sugar plantations in the Caribbean. The sugar was transported back to Bristol and then processed in the city. Anyone who bought sugar (or tea) at the time was implicated in the trade.

Bristol was a rich city, and the slave trade made it even wealthier. The interlinked sugar, glass and slave trades brought Bristol work and investment opportunities. All that money coming in needed to go somewhere for safe keeping...

Slave voyages were also pricey. They lasted several years, carried precious cargo and required large vessels. Not all slavers could finance the voyages themselves, and a major port like Bristol had all the support in place – insurance, money lending, and banks.

Wealthy tradesmen founded The Old Bank In 1750. Several of them were deeply involved in the transatlantic slave trade. Their money and the institution it created are now not only part of Bristol but a fundamental part of our whole Western financial system.

Directions

Continue up Corn Street and turn left onto Small Street. At the bottom turn left to join the large roundabout. Cross over to the Colston Avenue side of the roundabout and follow this road until Colston Street curves round to the right up the hill. Take Colston Street and stop outside the modern building of Colston Hall.

05 Colston Hall

Colston Hall is an internationally-acclaimed concert venue. Opened in 1876, it was built on the site of Colston Boys School which was established in 1707. You may have noticed a recurring theme – Colston Avenue, Colston Street, Colston Tower... who was this Colston?

In the centre nearby, you might have seen a bronze statue of a long-haired man leaning thoughtfully on a staff. Edward Colston was born in Bristol in 1636. A London-based merchant, he made part of his fortune from slavery by investing in Africa and the Caribbean. He owned shares in the Royal African Company, which for a time held the monopoly of trade in Africa, and was on its governing committee.

Besides his statue and street names, several schools celebrate Colston Day on 13 November. Why is a man with such obvious links to slavery still commemorated? It can be explained through the ways Colston used his profits. He was a philanthropist and funded local schools, almshouses, hospitals, and church restorations in the city of his birth.

Today debate rages over removing Colston's statue and commemorating the victims of slavery instead. Colston Hall is currently being refurbished. Following a petition (and a boycott by Bristolian band Massive Attack) it was announced in April 2017 that the venue would reopen with a new name.

Colston has become a delicate subject, balanced between slavery and charity. There are other examples in the city. . The University of Bristol's iconic Wills Tower was financed through tobacco grown by enslaved men, women and children. The legacy of slavery and the wealth these men generated remain to this day - so do the heated debates that go with them.

Directions

Continue on Pipe Lane to the left of Colston Hall. Turn left at the junction down Frogmore Street and continue until you see a road bridge. Just before the road bridge crosses, turn right up some steps that lead you up to the road above. Turn right onto Park Road and follow it up until you reach St George Street on your left. Turn onto Great George Street and continue until you reach number 7 on your left.

06 The Georgian House Museum, 7 Great George Street

"The pleasure, glory and grandeur of England has been advanced more by sugar than any other commodity..." These words were penned in 1745 by Sir Dalby Thomas, author of an historical account of West Indies trade. They are demonstrated in the buildings here on Great George Street.

Number 7 is now a museum of Georgian life. Its regal style is testament however to the riches of those who profited from buying and selling people. Their wallets, enriched by slavery and sugar

money, bought them elevated political, social and charitable positions throughout the city.

This elegant house was built in 1783 by John Pinney, 'owner' of Pero (the enslaved man for whom Pero's Bridge is named). Pinney had sugar plantations in the Caribbean, and a sugar importing business here in Bristol. Working in partnership with the anti-abolitionist pamphleteer James Tobin, Pinney made quite a fortune and left £340,000 on his death.

You can almost feel the sublime tranquillity of living here, the absolute converse to the life of those they profited from - ripped from their homes and sold onto perilous voyages to lead shackled lives of persecution and fear.

Though entrenched in wealth built upon slavery, Bristol was home to a strong and militant abolitionist movement. In 1788 it became the first city outside London to set up a committee for the abolition of the slave trade.

In 1807 An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was finally passed. This Act prohibited the slave trade in British territories but did not abolish the practice of slavery. It was not until the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833 that all slaves in the British Empire were granted their freedom (albeit after a period of 'apprenticeship' to help them adjust to being free). The politics behind the abolition of slavery itself are complex, but the offer of compensation to slave owners helped remove their resistance. Slave owners were given £20 million for the loss of their 'property', paid for by British taxpayers. An estimated £10 million of it remained in the UK.

In 2006 a debate was held in the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum here in Bristol asking "Should Bristol apologise for the slave trade?" Later that year, a group of highly powerful institutions signed a Statement of Regret, which concluded "*We give thanks to those who struggled to initiate this change and look to a time when slavery of every kind is abolished*".

We shouldn't forget or ignore slavery's influence on Bristol's success. There are still great balancing acts though to reconcile the city's dark past. Colonial slavery shaped modern Bristol - and Britain. We are still living with its legacies today.

 **Trail complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!**