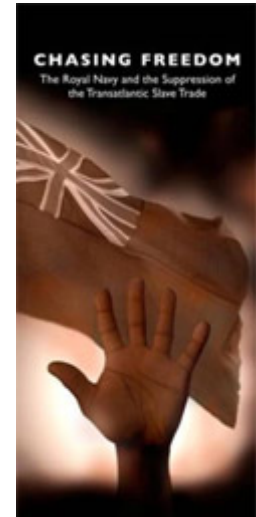


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Chasing Freedom: The Royal Navy and the suppression of the transatlantic slave trade

Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth Historic Dockyard

Whilst the complicity and association of British merchants and British ships in the transatlantic slave trade has received attention in many of the museum exhibitions around Britain, the role of the Royal Navy in suppressing the slave trade after its abolition by Parliament is only fleetingly referred to. The exhibition Chasing Freedom at the Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth Historic Dockyard, reveals the dangerous work undertaken by the Royal Navy in anti-slavery patrols along the coast of the African continent. This is a history of humanitarian endeavours which clashes with the history of Britain's role as the great slave trading nation. In effect the exhibition forms a means of finding positive aspects of British involvement in the traumatic and painful history of the Atlantic slave trade.



Visceral pasts

The exhibition forms a significant section of the museum's floor space and complements the history of the Royal Navy and sea travel found elsewhere in the museum. Chasing Freedom has four main aims; to increase the awareness of the Royal Navy's legacy by examining its role in the suppression of the slave trade; to raise the question of why, 200 years after its abolition, modern forms of slavery still persist; to highlight the continuing role of the Navy today in its worldwide humanitarian operations, including the prevention of people trafficking; and to illustrate the cultural legacy and contribution of enslaved Africans to Great Britain's historical development. A significant feature of the display is however to understand the human element in this history, which can all so easily be lost in figures and facts that defer comprehension of this element of the past. The figures are certainly relayed to the visitors in the display panels;

'Between 1807 and 1860, the Royal Navy, West Africa Squadron seized approximately 1600 ships involved in the slave trade and freed 150,000 Africans who were aboard these vessels.'

But it is in the displays of restraints used against the bodies of the enslaved, chains and manacles that immediately attract the eye of the visitor. The reproduction iron-pieces are displayed to be touched and felt by the museum visitor. These are placed alongside a section of a reconstructed interior of a slave ship, constructed from a sketch made by a Royal Navy surgeon. The display of the two-level hold of a slave ship offers a space for visitors to place themselves within the cramped conditions onboard. The visitor thereby possesses an immediate almost visceral sense of

both the necessity and moral worth of the Royal Navy Squadrons' campaigns. This is not however a one-sided perspective of suffering. This is certainly an exhibition which focuses on the physical experiences of both the enslaved and the sailors who worked in the Squadrons. Life in these Royal Navy ships is depicted as almost equally harsh and dangerous for the British sailors;

'Between 1830 - 1865, approximately 1587 men died on the West Africa Squadron, from a variety of causes: disease, killed in action and accidental deaths...'

This effect of mingling two perspectives of the physical experiences and sufferings of slavery and the anti-slavery campaigns has an effect of producing a united history combating 'the institution' of slavery. 'Slavery' itself is not presented as the policy of a specific nation or group of peoples; it is viewed as an agent that impacts upon the lives of both Africans and British sailors. This creates a shared narrative conveyed through the displays of a history that many might consider quite divisive.

Visitors to the exhibition are not only presented with the physical environment of the slave ships they are also assailed with interactive displays which utilise diaries and ships logs from the period to relay the experiences of life onboard. One particular narrative offered is the mid nineteenth century diary of Henry Binstead, an officer on the HMS Owen Glendower. The experiences of running down slave ships, freeing slaves from the pestilential conditions of the ship holds and seeing his own men succumb to the various tropical diseases of malaria and yellow fever which blighted the Squadron is offered to the visitor. Binstead's entry for Sunday July 13th 1823 reads;

'...many large whales and sharks are about us, the latter is owing to the number of poor fellows that have lately been thrown overboard - many of our own crew are very sick and the decks are crowded with black slaves who are dying in all directions.'

Accessible histories

In this manner of accessibility, the exhibition reveals the names and stories of individuals associated with the Squadron's work, both sailors and the enslaved. Samuel Adjai Crowther is perhaps the individual that attracts the most interest as he is one of the few enslaved Africans for which there exists substantial documentation. Rescued by the Squadron in 1822 when only 12, Crowther was resettled in Freetown, Sierra Leone, where he was baptised and educated. After being taken to England originally to complete his education in 1826, he returned to England to be ordained as a minister in the Church of England in 1843. Crowther worked in missions in West Africa, promoted the Yoruba language and in 1864 became the first African Bishop to be ordained in the Anglican Church. Another individual offered by the exhibition is that of Captain Hon. Joseph Denman, who worked tirelessly in the Squadron and is shown to have been motivated wholly by the horrors of the slave trade that he witnessed. Denman's activities along the coast and inland in western Africa are conveyed to the visitor with all the excitement of a swashbuckling adventure. His liberation of slaves and his work to suppress the trade are presented in the manner of a traditional naval hero. These are histories therefore of individuals

who overcame harrowing conditions to work for the betterment of others, they are figures for the visitor to associate with in a history which is certainly lacking untarnished role models in general.

Conclusions

The celebration and recognition of the work of the Squadrons is shown in the exhibition to be all the more important due to the continued activities of the Royal Navy in stopping people trafficking and smuggling in the modern world. A direct link is thereby made with the past. The legacy of the Squadrons is the role of the Royal Navy in policing international waters to contain modern forms of slavery. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the exhibition is however the way in which the history of the Atlantic slave trade post-1807 becomes a history of shared suffering. The continuance of slavery in British colonies until 1838 and the previous two-hundred years of British slavery are certainly stated in the exhibition, but it is the shared sense of distress caused by 'slavery', directly for the enslaved, indirectly for the sailors of the Squadron which distinguishes Chasing Freedom.

Responses

The above review of 'Chasing Freedom' offers a starting point for debating some significant issues in the histories of slavery and abolition, and in the way those issues are presented in museums and exhibitions. If you have thoughts to contribute, please email the 1807 Commemorated project team - arch-1807@york.ac.uk.