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For a .csv containing tabular data for all stories, see the larger collection at

<https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.ht259b362>.

For an archived snapshot of the story as it appeared between 2020 and 2023 on

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Dublin Core

Title

The Irish Sea and Atlantic Slavery

Subject

Irish Sea

Atlantic Slave Trade

Ports

Creator

Chris Evans

Publisher

Ports, Past and Present Project

Date

2023

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Relation

<https://perma.cc/6YCG-V3A7>

Format

Curatescape story

Language

English

Coverage

52.74003288362186, -5.278695642680714

Curatescape Story Item Type Metadata

Lede

The Irish Sea has been traversed, east and west, over millennia. In the 1700s, however, the Sea took on an additional dimension. With the rise of Liverpool as an Atlantic port, it became the great thoroughfare of English slaving.

Story

Nearly 5,000 slaving expeditions left Liverpool between the 1690s and the closure of the British slave trade in 1807. The scale and duration of the trade was such that it could not fail to affect ports and their hinterlands on both sides of the Channel. Not least, the slave trade made demands on shipyards. Most of Liverpool's slaving fleet was built in timber-rich North America or on the Mersey itself, but Liverpool's gravitational pull was felt around the Irish Sea too, especially in the aftermath of one of the eighteenth century's many Atlantic wars. At such moments, when slave merchants rushed to satisfy pent-up demand in the Caribbean, all available shipping was pressed into service. That is why Liverpool slavers chartered the *Boyne*, built at Dublin, to sail to Bonny (Nigeria), which it did on four occasions between 1749 and 1754.

The same urgent need accounts for Wexford's solitary contribution to the slave trade, the *Betty*, a 40-ton brigantine that loaded 90 shackled humans at the Gambia, 68 of whom hobbled ashore at Barbados in 1751. Keels laid down in Welsh shipyards also sailed for tropical waters, like the *John*, built at Milford Haven, which was fitted out at Liverpool for the 'Guinea Trade' after the Seven Years' War. The perimeter of the Irish Sea was also important for provisioning the Caribbean slave complex. The sugar islands were like oil rigs. They were specialised production platforms dedicated to a single high-value commodity. Everything necessary for plantation agriculture to function had to be brought in from outside. That meant, first and foremost, enslaved labourers from Africa. It also meant industrial equipment, food, and clothing. And here the Irish Sea littoral had a significant role to play. On the islands, the sap of sugar cane was processed in huge pans known, for obvious reasons, as coppers. Many of them had their beginnings in ore extracted from the great copper mine at Parys Mountain, Anglesey. The Parys Mine Company had mills and battery works at Greenfield in Flintshire at which copper could be rolled into the sheets needed for manufacturing sugar boilers. The mills also turned out manillas and 'Guinea Rods', which served as currencies in the slave trade.

Indeed, Thomas Williams, the formidable head of the Parys Company, when railing against proposals to abolish the slave trade, claimed that the articles made at Greenfield were 'entirely for the African market and not saleable for any other'. The Irish Sea littoral also supplied much of the clothing worn by the enslaved. The drab workwear issued to captive labourers was made up of cheap linens and coarse woollens. Typically, the woollens were produced in parts of Wales that touched upon Cardigan Bay. Here, impoverished rural households kept body and soul together by spinning and weaving wool. The bolts of cloth they made were known to English merchants as 'Welsh webs'. Shipped across the Atlantic, they were rebranded as 'Negro Cloth'. The enslaved had not only to be clothed; they had to be fed. And Ireland had a critical dietary contribution to make. Cork was the Chicago of the eighteenth-century Atlantic: a meat-packing centre of hemispheric importance.

The meat that emerged from the city's slaughterhouses made Cork an essential port of call for the supply ships that cleared English ports for the Caribbean. This is documented in the archive of Nathaniel Phillips, a Jamaican planter who purchased the Slebech estate, Pembrokeshire, with his slave-gotten gains. Phillips placed regular orders with Messrs Cuthbert & Hare of Cork for meat and dairy products. The Nancy of Liverpool, for example, took on tons of beef and pork at Cork in 1781 for provisioning his plantations. The Irish Sea was, to be sure, the great thoroughfare of English slaving. Yet it was more than that. The Sea was one of the great resources of the Atlantic slave system. From around its edges came the metals, animal protein, and animal fibres needed to sustain enslavement.

Factoid

Slavery links cattle in Munster, sheep in Merionethshire, and shipwrights in Ringsend.

Related Resources

Slave Voyages. This dataset provides details on over 36,000 transatlantic slave voyages between 1514 and 1866, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/>.

Claire Shaw, 'Liverpool's Slave Trade Legacy', *History Today*, Volume 70 Issue 3 March 2020, archived at <https://perma.cc/VEG4-NAXG>.

Chris Evans, *Slave Wales: The Welsh and Atlantic Slavery, 1660-1850* (University of Wales Press, 2010)

Official Website