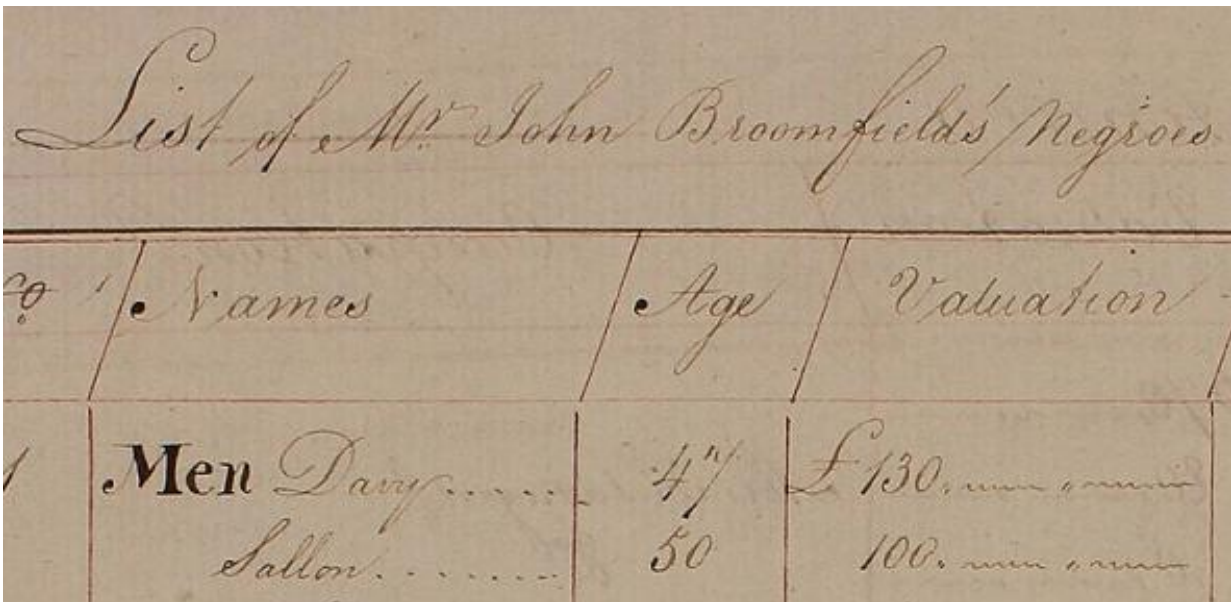


# Documents reveal price of Britain's slave trade

August 13 2015, by Tom Kirk



*List of Mr. John Broomfield's Negroes*

No	Names	Age	Valuation
1	<b>Men</b> Dany.....	4 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub>	£ 130. ....
	Sallon.....	50	100. ....

Detail from a list of the names, ages and prices of slaves bought by British plantation owner William Philip Perrin from John Broomfield in 1796. Credit: Permission of St John's College, Cambridge

Letters discussing the value and sale of slaves in the 18th century, which provide a distressing reminder of the powerful business interests that sustained one of the darkest chapters in British history, are to be made available to researchers and the public by St John's College, University of Cambridge.

The collection contains the business exchanges of an 18th century English landowner, William Philip Perrin, who ran a sugar plantation near Kingston, Jamaica. In it, Perrin and his correspondents discussed in callously practical terms the human cargo that was being shipped to the West Indies at the height of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, a time when the equivalent of millions of pounds were changing hands as slaves were bought and sold.

The papers have been acquired by St John's College, which was the undergraduate College of leading anti-slavery campaigners William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson, whose combined efforts helped to bring about the Abolition Bill of 1807. While the College already holds a wide-ranging collection of material dealing with the anti-slavery movement, these documents tell the other, rarely-discussed side of the story, by providing an insight into the wealth and influence that lay behind the pro-slavery lobby.

One list, dating from 1797, contemporary with Clarkson's own evidence-gathering campaign against slavery, details the names, ages and prices of slaves to be bought for Perrin's plantation. The note, described as "a list of Mr John Broomfield's negroes, with their age and valuation", catalogues 35 men and 19 women, as well as children as young as 14, who had been valued for sale as slaves.

Entries such as "Dick, 25, able field negro, £140" and "Castile, 45, cook and washerwoman, £60" provide a stark and shocking reminder of the high financial stakes that Clarkson and his contemporaries struggled to overthrow. The total valuation for 54 male and female slaves came to £5,100, a sum equal to around £500,000 today.

The collection is being added to an extensive range of material, already held by the College Library, dealing with the political and social conflicts faced by the anti-slavery campaigners in the fight for

Abolition. This is made available both to researchers studying the period, and also used as part of educational activities with schools, enabling students to examine primary sources and discover the historic significance of the Abolitionist movement.

Kathryn McKee, Special Collections Librarian at the College, who acquired the papers, which were previously held in Derby County Records Office, said: "These documents provide first-hand evidence of the sale of slaves to British plantation owners. Though appalling to modern eyes, for those involved these were matter-of-fact business transactions: a routine part of the [18th century](#) economy in which business magnates made substantial profits from commodities produced by slave labour and their customers benefited from cheap goods. In opposing the traffic in human cargo, Clarkson, Wilberforce and the Abolitionists were challenging powerful vested interests."



"Am I Not A Man And A Brother", a popular anti-slavery image that appeared on posters and was later turned into a brooch by Josiah Wedgwood as part of the Abolitionist campaign. Credit: permission of St John's College, Cambridge

The papers date from between 1772 and 1797, at the time when the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Britain and America was at its peak, and deal with the day-to-day running of Perrin's plantation in Jamaica. Among letters and bills of sale specifying property disputes, shipping preparations and customs duties, are chilling details revealing the ubiquity and commercialisation of slavery and the vast industry it

supported.

A letter from 1796 states that one of Perrin's estate managers had been "on the lookout for a gang of up to 60 able-bodied Negroes" to purchase on Perrin's behalf to work on developing his Grange Hill estate. Another discusses how buying cheap slaves to work the land for sugar cane would "relieve the estate from the expense of buying cattle", and allow for more sugar to be sold for rum, which brought in a profit of £4,500 a year, equal to around £400,000 today. A later note assures the reader that the slaves are "happy and contented with their situation".

Kathryn said: "What these letters reveal, apart from a total lack of empathy for their human commodities is the sheer amount of money involved. Many anti-slavery campaigns were grassroots efforts by ordinary people, while the pro-slavery lobby had significant wealth and influence they could use to exert pressure on Parliament."

Dr Richard Benjamin, Head of the International Slavery Museum, said:

"These papers are a rich resource which will rightly now be made available to the wider public. Something that should be done for all such papers wherever they may reside.

"The Perrin papers add another layer of information to the narrative of the transatlantic [slave trade](#), which can be both disturbing and distressing, especially when humans are so calmly and callously treated as cargo. While adding to our understanding of the mechanics of the transatlantic slave trade, they also highlight uncomfortable truths - that greed, power and a misguided sense of superiority made up its dark heart.



countries became powerful, we should never see them solely through those spectrums. Such documents are portals into the lives and struggles of fathers, mothers, sons, sisters, merchants, scholars and every possible profession that makes up any society.

"We should also see these papers as part of a larger body of historical documentation that sheds light on the resistance to that dark heart by abolitionists such as Clarkson and Wilberforce, sons of Cambridge University, and probably more importantly by Africans themselves, from Olaudah Equiano to the Maroons of Jamaica, from Cuffy in Berbice to daily acts of defiance by the enslaved across the Americas and Caribbean".

The anti-slavery campaigners faced vicious and well-funded opposition both in Parliament and on the streets. On one trip in 1787 to Liverpool, which along with Bristol was one of the major hubs of the slave trade in England, an attempt was made to drown Clarkson in the docks for asking too many questions.

Despite this hostility, and after a 20 year struggle, the Abolitionists finally achieved victory on 25 March 1807, with the passing of a Bill to abolish the slave trade, making the sale and purchase of [slaves](#) illegal in Britain. Clarkson, reflecting on this momentous event, wrote in 1808:

"Thus ended a contest, not of brutal violence, but of reason. A contest between those who felt deeply for the happiness and the honour of their fellow-creatures, and those who, through vicious custom and the impulse of avarice, had trampled underfoot the sacred rights of their nature."

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Documents reveal price of Britain's slave trade (2015, August 13) retrieved 3 May 2024

from <https://phys.org/news/2015-08-documents-reveal-price-britain-slave.html>

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