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Matthews, Jodie (2020) Canals and Transatlantic Slavery: A Literature Review. Canal & River Trust.

Publisher: Canal & River Trust

Version: Published Version

Downloaded from: https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/635812/

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Additional Information: This review was first published by the Canal & River Trust

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Canal & River Trust

Canals and Transatlantic Slavery

A Preliminary Literature Review

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1. Introductory summary

- This review of existing academic literature uses mostly digital online sources, as the research took place during COVID-19 lockdown. A longer period of research and access to physical libraries and archives would enable greater detail and specificity. The sources include: Gale Cengage Primary Sources (for contemporaneous newspaper articles and pamphlets), Google Scholar, jisc.ac.uk, databases of scholarly journals (e.g. *Journal of Transport History*), and databases of PhD theses. As academic resources, many of the sources cited are behind paywalls, which may limit availability for those without institutional access.

- Canals transported goods produced by enslaved people, including indigo, tobacco, rice, cotton, and sugar. Canal, port and boat records offer the chance to think about the journey of commodities from plantation to consumer.

- There are many individual examples of the profits of slavery being invested in canals, to which this review makes reference; we are not yet in a position to try to come to a cumulative financial total of this investment.

- The industrial histories of major cities that we associate with canal history can be told in relation to the history of slavery, such as Liverpool and Manchester.

- There are many untold stories of Black[1] experience in relation to the waterways, and telling them in more detail might involves acts of imagination and an openness to different kinds of historical knowledge and evidence. We could, for instance, look at the key figures whose lives are well documented because they had wealth and power, and go on to think about Black people whose lives are just outside the frame of the narratives we are used to telling.

2. Canal heritage, research, and Black history

The Black Lives Matter movement has accelerated the work of cultural institutions in examining their relationship to race, ethnicity, and diverse representation of historical lives and experiences. This found new impetus following the killing in the US of George Floyd. Demonstrations in the wake of police brutality saw a visible and righteous anger at the fact that slave traders were still heroised and historical links to slavery unexamined by White people. A number of prominent statues were defaced, toppled, or hurriedly removed, including a statue of Robert Milligan, a Scottish slave-owner in Jamaica whose wealth built the West India Docks, from Canal & River Trust land. The statue was commissioned by the West India Docks Co. and unveiled in 1813 (UCL Department of History, 2020). The removal of Milligan's statue is an opportunity to reassess the relationship between British trade and industry, in particular canals and waterways, and slavery. Olivette Otele, professor of the history of slavery at the University of Bristol, has said that she often hears that slavery and colonialism 'led to vibrant, culturally diverse societies'. However, she clarifies that 'it is certainly not what colonisers and slave traders were hoping to achieve […] though diversity has indeed been one result'. She adds that 'our celebrated, culturally diverse societies' are also 'rigged with racism, social inequalities and discrimination' (Otele, 2019). This is something of a warning note against narratives about the history of slavery that try to spin the trade into a good-news diversity story, and emphasises that there is a politics and an ethics to reconsidering Black British history in the twenty-first century. Otele also makes an important statement about the connections between slavery and the heritage work of organisations like the Trust: 'embedded in the history of enslavement are economic, social, cultural, political and ideological ideas that shape the way we represent the past' (Otele, 2019).

The early 2000s saw an appeal for history of transport researchers to pay attention to 'race as a fundamental category of analysis' in their work (Seiler, 2007). For Cotten Seiler, taking account of race 'provides an especially powerful optic on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the industrial(ising) democracies of Europe and North America'. In canal historical studies we would add the eighteenth century to that backwards look (though the concept of race as we inherit it today crystallized in the nineteenth century). Indeed, says Seiler, 'the history of modern transport is inextricable from a history of race' (Seiler, 2007).

[1] 'Black' and 'White' as racial or ethnic descriptors have been capitalised in this report. For the politics of this gesture see Appiah, 2020.

3. Canal investment and slave owners

There has long been debate about the extent to which the British economy overall benefitted from slavery, and its role in the industrialisation in the nation. This academic debate has always been political, but is increasingly taken up by politicians, commentators and in newspapers and magazines. However, as David Hunter pointed out last year, 'undeniable is the fact that some families were able to buy land, build mansions, and become politically powerful in Britain thanks to the repatriation of profits' (Hunter, 2019). For the individuals who benefitted, 'profits earned from slavery were not only large, they were particularly likely to be invested into banks, textile factories, or canals' (Eltis & Engerman, 2000).

The UCL and Harvard's recent *Legacies of British Slave-ownership* project has been extremely useful in tracing the proceeds of slavery invested in canals, and the role that figures in the slave trade played in the running or support of canal companies. The project has, in particular, looked at the records of individuals paid compensation when slavery was abolished. An important figure in the concept of paying slave-owners compensation was Augustus Hardin Beaumont, a member of White planter society in Jamaica. He argued that the crime of slave-owning was perpetrated by the British nation rather than individual owners, so the latter should be compensated by the former. He also had strong views on canals and the transport network more broadly; on moving to London he became active in political radicalism, advocating universal male suffrage (all the while submitting slavery compensation claims), and arguing that full employment could be secured by nationalizing the canals and railways (McClelland, 2016). Beaumont is an example of an historical figure whose interests and investments entwine the histories of slavery and the waterways. Twenty-first-century politics have demanded a reassessment of the proceeds of slavery in Britain, but this kind of questioning is not new. In 1931, Lady Simon (wife of the then Foreign Secretary) spoke in Coventry about the 'extraordinary mentality' that allowed slave-traders to build churches with the proceeds of the trade. She asserted that 'Britain's participation in the early history of slave traffic was black enough to cause English people to bow their heads for ever in shame' (Churches Built from Slavery Profits, 1931).

Examples from the UCL database of slave-owners include Moses Benson, a Liverpool slave-trader who owned a 'palace mansion' in the city and was a generous patron of the arts. He also invested in canals, leaving 230 shares in the Lancaster Canal in his will in 1806, a canal that had opened nine years earlier (UCL Department of History, 2020). In turn, the canal had a dramatic effect on the economy of Preston, including the establishment of cotton mills (Biddle, 2018). In another example, Lowbridge Bright was a Bristol West India merchant and sat on the Committee of the Thames and Severn Canal Company in 1783, a canal often celebrated for the Sapperton Tunnel under the Cotswolds (UCL Department of History, 2020). Another slave-owner, William Carey, was an attorney in Jamaica. He owned shares in the Grand Junction Canal, which he left in his will to his son. George Hyde Clarke, meanwhile, inherited an estate and 220 enslaved people. He was a promoter, shareholder and Committee member of the Peak Forest Canal Company, built as a link to the limestone quarries of the Peak District (UCL

Department of History, 2020). Some of the financial investments detailed are of much smaller scale, but nonetheless reveal the extent of the intricate network connecting Britain's slave trade with canals. For instance, Harriet Spooner, who received an annuity from two estates in Jamaica, left four shares in the Witham Navigation to her brother-in-law in her will. There are also individual stories beyond this database, with more ripe for research. One example is Cecilia Douglas (1772-1862), a West Indian planter and slave owner who received £3,000 in compensation at emancipation and invested some of this in the Forth & Clyde Canal, a waterway also used to transport slave-produced sugar, as detailed below (Mullen, 2016).

4. Canals transporting goods produced by enslaved people of African descent

Many transport and economic histories are silent on the source of raw materials and commodities being transported – and thus silent on the relationship between canals and slavery. There is an opportunity to return to some of the standard histories of the waterways and the history of individual commodities in Britain with this focus on the waterways as implicated in the perpetuation of the business of slavery. Port, toll, boat, and other records are one way of linking slave labour with canal transport, offering the chance to think about the journey of commodities from plantation to consumer. The hub of Britain's trade with America 'was to be found in the slave-plantation colonies of the West Indies and the southern mainland, whose sugar, rum, coffee, tobacco, and rice made up 80 per cent of England's American imports by 1775 (Nash, 2010). In thinking about internal transport by water, it is important to remember that these goods were all fairly light (in comparison to limestone or timber, for instance) and Dan Bogart et al have asserted that 'initial canal development [was] an effort to provide services to traders in *heavy* goods, which were prohibitively expensive by road'. Meanwhile, traders in lighter goods 'were served by roads and operated in different, complementary markets'. It is thus important not to make too many assumptions (as these commodities were also often transported by coastal shipping around Britain). Canal transport did change over time to incorporate the kind of commodities discussed here: 'once canal infrastructure was in place, entrepreneurial canal carriers developed express services, like fly boats, which became substitutes for traditional road services' (Bogart, Lefors, & Satchell, 2019). Harry Hanson's classic work on canal boat traffic reports that 'on their return [from London] fly boats would be loaded with about 8 tons of *colonial goods*', the sort of reference that can be decoded in relation to slave-produced materials (quoted in Bogart, Lefors, & Satchell, 2019; emphasis added).

In addition, manufacturing almost anything with slave-produced raw materials also required coal, so this too is a commodity more distantly implicated in the business of slavery (very little coal was transported by road).

4a. Tobacco

Enslaved Africans first arrived in Virginia in the early seventeenth century. The use of their labour 'grew slowly and gradually until the last third of the seventeenth century, when it surged upward before undergoing a second, more accelerated period of expansion in the first few decades of the eighteenth century' (Coombs, 2011). By the time of the British canal age, the tobacco plantation economy was very well established. British tobacco importers were integral to Virginia slavery from the beginning: 'during the 1670s and 1680s, all slaves sent to Virginia through the auspices of the Royal African Company [...] arrived through contract deliveries arranged by major London tobacco importers' (Coombs, 2011). In the eighteenth century, Bristol was an important processing centre for tobacco imported from the plantations, though Glasgow overtook it in the nineteenth century. The opening of the Kennet & Avon Canal in 1810 allowed a faster route for tobacco between Bristol and London. When the tobacco firm Wills and Ditchett bought tobacco leaf at Liverpool 'it was carried by the Lancashire and Midlands canal system as far as Stourport. At this point, where the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal entered the Severn Waterway, it was usually transhipped because of the change to broad gauge' (Alford, 2010). The tobacco industry in Kendal began in the 1790s, and benefitted from the Lancaster Canal after 1819 once the size of ships made the River Lune difficult to navigate and the port of Lancaster began to lose out to Liverpool. Tobacco imported to Britain came not just from Virginia, but also from the plantations of the West Indies.

4b. Sugar

By the eighteenth century, sugar had become the most valuable commodity in world trade. Sugar has a central role in American slavery: its production demanded more labour power than almost any other crop: 'it could produce a high profit only if it was produced at a very large scale' (Anker, 2020). Some have argued that sugar was popular not because it satisfied an innate human desire for a sweet taste, but because of its mass availability: 'the insatiable desire for sugar was, arguably, created from slavery, dispossession, and the pursuit of profit' (Anker, 2020). This interpretation complicates simple explanations for why Britain has imported particular commodities, which were then moved around the country by canal.

In 1906, Edwin Pratt commented that 'in former days a grocer would order 30 tons of sugar from Bristol to be delivered to him by boat', demonstrating small - as well as large-scale water transport of imported sugar (Pratt, 1906). Liverpool, as a city heavily invested in the slave trade, also built up a trade in sugar. By 1768 there were eight 'sugar houses' in the city. Some seventeen years later there were a dozen sugar houses and 16,600 tons of raw sugar was imported annually. The growth of the trade continued after the abolition of the slave trade by British ships in 1807 (though slavery was still in place in America) (King, 2000). Sugar was also processed at Manchester and Warrington in the second half of the eighteenth century (Timmins, 1998). An example of evidence of the transport of sugar by canal (beyond toll records) is a newspaper article from 1860 detailing a fire at a sugar house at Limehouse. The factory 'flanked the river entrance of the Regent's Canal

Dock' (Great Fire at Limehouse , 1860). In Scotland in 1836, sugar and tobacco coming from the west were charged at 2 ½d. and 2d. per mile respectively on the Forth & Clyde Canal (Forth and Clyde Canal Dues, 1837).

British consumers were aware of the human cost of the sugar in their tea, especially after the publication of William Fox's 1791 pamphlet, *An Address to the people of Great Britain on the propriety of abstaining from West Indian sugar and rum*. This pamphlet helped promote the idea that sugar was contaminated with the suffering of slaves who made it.

4c. Indigo

Most indigo came from India, but often cheaper (and lower quality) indigo was imported from the plantations of South Carolina. This trade 'provided the British textile industry with virtually its entire supply of dyestuffs and hence had a strategic importance out of all proportion to its monetary value' (Nash, 2010). By the 1790s there was worldwide oversupply of indigo and the Carolina industry collapsed, so the canal transport of slave-produced indigo from Carolina would have been short-lived. Indigo was also grown in and imported from the West Indies.

4d. Cotton

The cotton story is a complicated one in terms of cause and effect, labour and investment, slavery and British industry. One cannot straightforwardly say that because industrial Britain (and thus the canals) were heavily invested in cotton, it was also *inevitably* reliant on slavery, that without slavery there would have been no industrial leap forward. Slavery was, indeed, how a huge amount of money was made, but there was no inevitability to the plantation model for growing this crop. Unlike sugar, 'early mainland cotton growers [in America] deployed slave labour, not because of its productivity or aptness for the new crop, but because they were already slave owners, searching for profitable alternatives to tobacco, indigo, and other declining crops'. In fact, 'it is doubtful that this brutal system served the long-run interests of textile producers in Lancashire and in New England' (Wright, 2020).

Textiles from Greater Manchester were an important part of the transatlantic slave trade. In terms of cotton, 'the slave trade was not so much a triangular trade as a circular one'. Cotton cloth produced in Britain and India was sent to Africa to pay for the slaves who were transported to America, who then grew the cotton shipped to Britain to make the cloth that was sold to Africa. It is hard to overestimate the importance of cotton to British industry: 'by 1860, nearly half the factories in Britain were for cotton production' (Powell, 2018). By the 1820s 'almost all of the cotton carried to Manchester was brought on canals and rivers; the Old Quay Company carried around half of Liverpool's imports (200,000 bags, roughly 30,000 tons), the Bridgewater Canal carried a similar quantity, while the Leeds & Liverpool Canal carried approximately 4,000–7,000 tons'. However, early in the canals' history, trans-shipment costs meant that cotton was often transported on to towns around Manchester by road (Bogart, Lefors, & Satchell, 2019).

One can, as transport historians have previously done, trace the journey of particular commodities on individual canals. For instance, on the Bridgewater, toll income was more valuable than weight: 'this trading pattern reflected both the high values of the cargoes hauled and the distance that they were carried'. The Manchester–Liverpool trade leg 'mainly consisted of finished textile goods' which commanded high tolls (Maw, 2013). The Rochdale Canal, meanwhile, 'saw most of its income come from corn carried in from the eastern agricultural districts, but did still derive considerable income from tolls collected on cotton yarn and textiles going to Hull for export' (Maw, 2013). While Hull was not a slave trading port, the completion of the Rochdale Canal in 1804 'provided, via connections with the Calder & Hebble and the Aire & Calder, the first direct water route from Manchester to Hull, a matter of great moment to Manchester merchants exporting [cotton] yarn and piece goods to mainland Europe' (Maw, 2013). Giorgio Riello's 2013 book, *Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern World*, asserts that 'machinery and cotton *together* allowed for a tremendous expansion of production' and we might add that the technology to which Riello refers must include canals (Riello, 2013).

5. Development of major cities

Many canal-oriented histories of cities describe the role that waterways have had in the development of that place; those histories are intricately, if often invisibly, related to the city's relationship with slavery. Otele (2019) has suggested that 'it is important that we continue to challenge urban representations of the past, and reinvent the way we look at the memory of enslavement'. Below are some examples of the role of slavery in the development of cities that regularly feature in the story of Britain's waterways. There are far more stories to tell, especially as the UCL Legacies of British Slave Ownership project continues to map investments. For instance, as David Dabydeen has noted, Birmingham's ironware production meant that it 'armed the slave trade' (BBC Press Office, 2007).

5a. Bristol

By 1725, 'Bristol's cargoes of rum, sugar, indigo and logwood were greater than Liverpool, Whitehaven and Glasgow combined'. In the slave trade, too, 'Bristol had outpaced London as the premier slave-trading port'. In the 1740s, 'Bristol's ships delivered 36,700 slaves to the plantations compared to Liverpool's 21,500 and London's 4,800' (Poole & Rogers, 2017). One wealthy Bristolian, Richard Bright, 'used his surplus capital from the Jamaica trade to venture into banking, canals, sugar refineries, copper, iron and rope works' (Poole & Rogers, 2017). Bright was not the only one: Bristolians were 'caught up in the canal mania of the early 1790s. [...] In November 1792 large sums were subscribed at Guildhall for a projected canal from Bristol to Gloucester, which it was hoped would link Bristol more securely to the West Midland industries and avoid the heavy and sometimes unpredictable costs of shipping down the turbulent Severn' (Poole & Rogers, 2017). The records of these meetings might help us understand which commodities and trades were explicitly listed as gaining potential benefit from the canal (e.g. sugar and cotton, directly linked to slavery).

The only successful canal from this flurry of activity was the Kennet & Avon, which linked Bristol to London in 1810. And, while Bristol 'was able to import slave-grown cotton from the American south, the Great Western Cotton Company was no match for Cottonopolis' (Poole & Rogers, 2017).

5b. Liverpool

Simon Gikandi reminds us that, even though 'we are used to thinking about English slavery from the vantage point of its abolition and the humanitarian discourse surrounding it', there was a time when 'to oppose slavery was considered un-English and unpatriotic'. This could be seen in the opinions of men like Thomas Golightly, 'owner of a slaving ship and the mayor of Liverpool'. In a petition to Parliament against abolition in 1788, Golightly pointed out that infrastructure improvements to the city in order to sustain the slave trade had 'improve[d] the wealth and prosperity' not just of the city, but also 'the kingdom at large'. He included in those improvements 'canals and other communications from the interior parts of this kingdom' (Gikandi, 2011).

There is scholarly debate as to the reasons for Liverpool's dominance of the slave trade. 'Some suggest that Liverpool merchants were being pushed out of the other Atlantic trades, such as sugar and tobacco'. A significant factor, though, was a situation similar to that in Bristol: 'the port's position with ready access via a network of rivers and canals to the goods traded in Africa – textiles from Lancashire and Yorkshire, copper and brass from Staffordshire and Cheshire and guns from Birmingham' (National Museums Liverpool, n.d.). Kenneth Morgan concurs that the growth of Liverpool in the eighteenth century enabled its merchants to 'exploit the trading possibilities of the Anglo-American market', relying on 'ready access to the linen industries of south Lancashire'. Importantly, 'after 1770 good canal links between the Mersey, the industrial North West and the Midlands facilitated the flow of export goods into the port of Liverpool' (Morgan, 2000). The city's 'primacy in the import of raw cotton was established in the late 1790s'. However, the main period of growth was after 1800 (Maw, 2013). Indeed, 'by 1800 Liverpool was better connected to an inland network of communications than any British port of comparable size'. As described above, slave-produced cotton was sent by canal to the Lancashire mills, and the manufactured textiles re-entered the slave trade along those same arteries. The development of the canals was part of the 'platform for Liverpool's important role in the nineteenth-century Atlantic economy' (Morgan, 2000).

5c. Manchester

The development of Manchester and Liverpool in relation to slave-produced cotton is symbiotic, enabled by new transport links (How did money from slavery help develop Greater Manchester?, n.d.). Manchester's cotton story is well-trodden ground, but an engaging chapter in that story and that of its environs is the Lancashire Cotton Famine. The American Civil War, fought largely over slavery, had an impact on thousands of textile workers in the north-west of England because their livelihoods relied on the supply of slave-grown cotton (used in the region until 1865, despite slavery having been abolished in 1838). The northern states in

America blockaded southern ports, meaning that there was a shortage of exported raw slave-grown cotton. Liverpool traders also suspended trade waiting for prices to increase. This led to the 'Lancashire Cotton Famine' (1862-3), which was a period of great hardship and even starvation for anyone connected with the cotton trade (The American Civil War and the Lancashire Cotton Famine, n.d.). Simon Rennie's work on dialect poetry of the period has shown a new side to this story, and his research reveals the potential for using all sorts of contemporaneous textual sources to reveal local attitudes to Atlantic geopolitics. A clear connection to the canals is via a poet who signs himself 'John Parry, Boatbuilder' and writes from Bardsley, between Oldham and Ashton-Under-Lyne. Ashton and Stalybridge have tended to be used as sites of focus for discussion of the effects of the Cotton Famine. Parry wrote a patriotic piece called 'A Briton's Appeal' which is 'unflinching in its condemnation of the British misery which the American war has caused' (Rennie, 2020). Toole suggests that 'the question of support for slavery and abolition' in the region 'cannot be separated from the industrial conflict unleashed by the manufacturers in 1860' (Toole, 1998).

6. Individual figures; untold lives

There is much more research still to be done to uncover the ways in which the lives of individual Black Britons are intertwined with the history of the canals. Gretchen Gerzina points out that 'as the development of British colonies in the West Indies boomed, so did the black population of Britain as planters returned home with their black servants', meaning that there are many Black lives connected to canal investors and beyond to retrieve (Gerzina, 1995). For instance, in 1768 the number of Black servants in London was estimated at 20,000, out of a total London population of 676,250 (Gerzina, 1995).

We can begin by looking at the key figures whose lives are well documented because they had wealth and power, and go on to think about Black people whose lives are just outside the frame of the narratives we are used to telling. This requires a degree of imagination: 'each time a letter or memoir mentions a momentous occasion at which a "faithful black" was present, we must put words into silent mouths' (Gerzina, 1995). An example of the sort of tangential story-making implied by this is the art that hung on the Duke of Bridgewater's walls. In 1798 he bought Titian's 'Diana and Actaeon', originally painted for Philip II of Spain, and which hung in Bridgewater's own parlour (The National Gallery, n.d.). The painting features Diana's Ethiopian handmaiden. Titian's work and that of his contemporaries often featured Black pages and servants, and in a painting like 'Diana and Actaeon' it was part of 'an iconographic tradition that brought together a high ranking fair woman with dark-skinned attendants' (Bestor, 2003). Bridgewater's interest and investment in art has been said to have had a huge impact on British art collecting and exhibition more widely (The National Gallery, n.d.), and the money available for those purchases came from his coal mines and canal. That Bridgewater daily looked on the painted portrait of a Black subject is one small way in which the history of images of Blackness in Britain is connected to the history of its canals.

Another way to speculate about Black lives in relation to the waterways is to consider where Black people in Britain lived, and how likely it is that at least some of them worked at docks, warehouses, wharves or perhaps even constructing the canals or working on boats. For instance, after 1783, Black soldiers from revolutionary America (around 20% of soldiers on both side of the war were Black) came to London. Many became beggars because of the regulation of trades in English cities but, given that many such individuals lived in Limehouse, it seems likely that some will have found work of some kind related to water trade (Gerzina, 1995). One former slave (and African prince), Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and his White English wife, Betty, lived in Kidderminster in the 1770s, where Betty worked as a weaver. He is sure to have witnessed the building, opening and early operation of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal, though it is not detailed in his autobiography (Gronniosaw, 2001). Another former slave, James Johnson, who detailed his life and settled in Oldham, would also have been familiar with the canal.

Abolitionists and anti-slavery campaigners are also part of this story, but in detailing these lives it is important not to reinforce the 'White saviour complex' and centre the experiences of privileged White people further. The choices of these individuals do not always place them on the 'right side of history' either. David Barclay (1729-1809) was a banker and brewer, whose name lives on in banking today. His father had run a linen and merchant house in Cheapside in London. Barclay foresaw that trade with America would become difficult so reduced their exports there. From his mother, Barclay inherited a share in Freame bank which, with a new name – Barclay, Bevan, and Bening – was part of a network of Quaker banks financing canals (as well as other infrastructure investments and trade). Barclay went on to use his influence to move English Quakers into a stronger stand against slavery. This was a conflicted position, as his bank also financed slavers and slave-owners (Price & Hannah, 2004). Joseph Gales, a newspaper editor and proprietor, was one of a number of figures who saw abolition and canal construction as parts of an enlightened social agenda: 'as an editor Gales pursued a reformist agenda for the abolition of slavery, educational improvements, canal building, and, especially, the removal of legal constraints on religious dissenters' (Donnelly, 2008).

Josiah Wedgwood and Thomas Bentley's connections to the Trent & Mersey Canal are well known, but this story is rarely told in direct relation to Wedgwood and Bentley's anti-slavery campaigning, in particular the design of an image and production of Wedgwood medallions with the inscription 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' as part of the campaign for abolition. David Dabydeen has called the medallion 'the most famous image of a black person in all of 18th-century art' (Dabydeen, 2017).

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