

Background information

Plantations and Slave Labour

Reliant on slave labour, the sugar plantations were the most profitable industry in the British Caribbean. In order to produce sugar, African slaves planted and harvested the sugar cane in the fields before crushing and boiling the cane in nearby factories. Plantations ranged from 80 to 2,000 acres and employed between 40 to 500 slave labourers.

Planters came from a wide variety of professional backgrounds across the British Isles. Owning a plantation incurred many challenges, however, planters could make huge profits. Many chose to live off their wealth back home in Britain.

For the slaves, plantation life meant hard labour, severe punishment and poor nutrition, sanitation, housing and clothing. High death rates perpetuated the demand for new slaves. Slaves often responded by individual acts of resistance as well as open rebellion. [1]

Codification of Racism

Britain's exclusive use of Africans in the transatlantic slave trade contributed to a widespread British belief in the inferiority of the African race. Many justified the trade in humans by claiming that they rescued captives from a barbarous existence in Africa. By introducing slaves to Christianity, Britains believed they were saving their souls.

Profit and Power

How much slavery contributed to the British economy is ferociously debated. The individuals in the partnerships that financed slaving voyages often grew rich on the profits. Annual returns averaged around 10%. Even after Abolition, British manufacturers, merchants and investors continued to make money by providing goods and financial credit to other slave trading nations.

During the period of Britain's involvement in the slave trade, the Caribbean was the most lucrative of Britain's imperial possessions. Much of the wealth generated in the Caribbean made its way back to Britain, where owners often chose to live on their income as absentee proprietors.

Some of the money Britain paid to African merchants and Caribbean planters was used to purchase British goods. As the slave trade grew the amount of money circulated increased and the markets expanded. By the 1770s, many British industries sold at least 70% of their exports to America and Africa. The profits from sugar made by the Caribbean were responsible for almost 50% of the growth of Britain's domestically produced exports between 1748-1776. This growth contributed to the pace and scale of British industrialisation. In these ways, the slave trade contributed to securing Britain's economic, industrial and imperial position during this period.

