

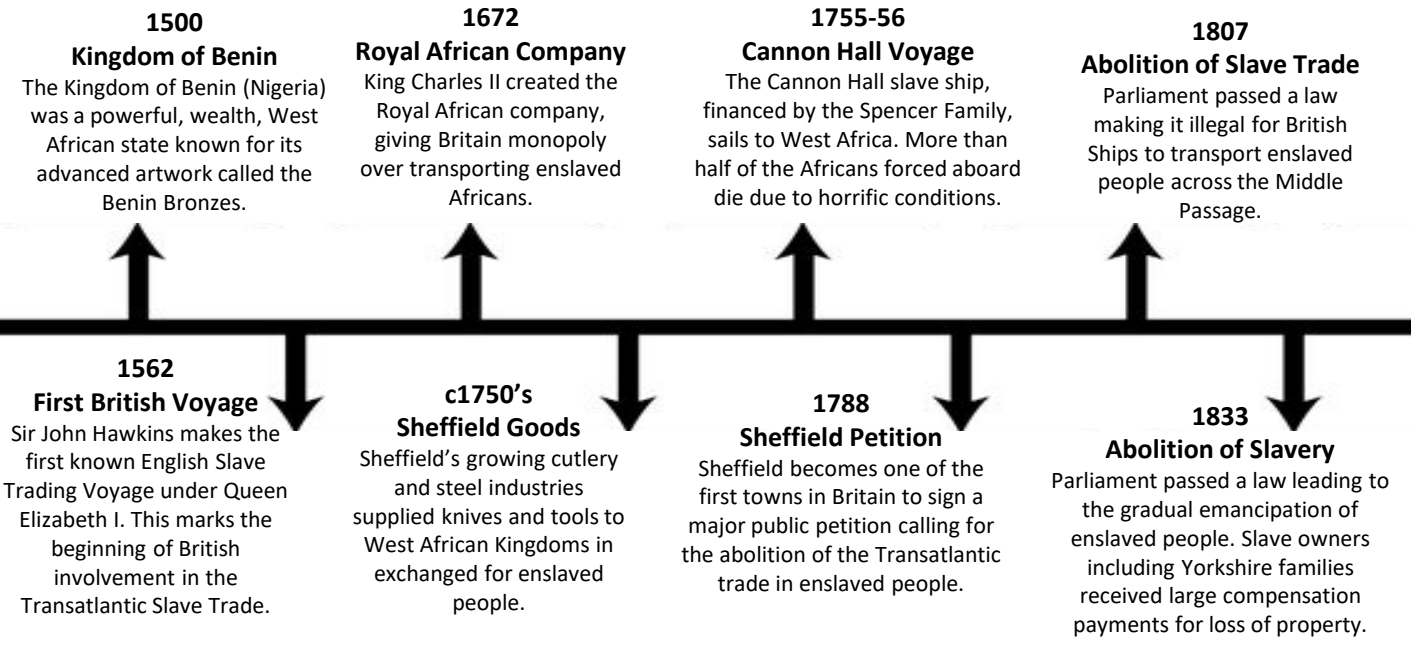
Knowledge Organiser: What do sources reveal about Sheffield's Hidden Connections to the Transatlantic trade in enslaved people?



Topic Summary:

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, Britain played a major role in the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved People, forcing millions of Africans to the Americas through violence and exploitation. Although Sheffield was not a port, the city was connected through metal goods traded for enslaved people and through local investors, such as the Spencer family and the Cannon Hall voyage. At the same time, many Sheffield residents campaigned against slavery by signing petitions, writing poems and boycotting slave-produced goods. Through studying artefacts, documents and maps, this unit reveals the experiences of enslaved people and Sheffield's hidden links to the trade.

Key Dates:



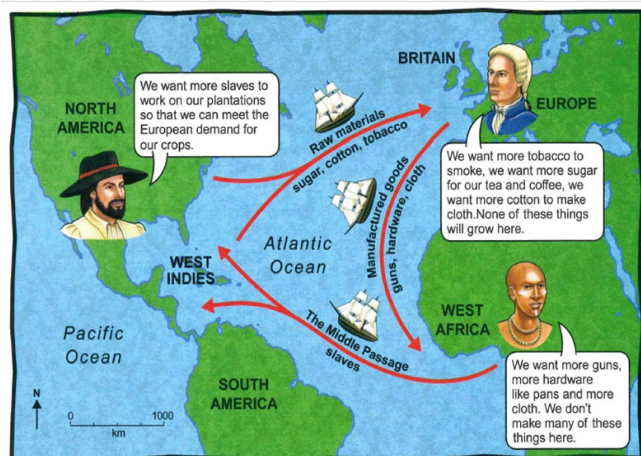
Key People:

	<p>Benjamin Spencer (1725-1759) A Sheffield Merchant who organised and profited from the Cannon Hall slave ship voyage.</p>
	<p>Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797) A former enslaved African and abolitionist. He wrote an autobiography detailing his experiences of being enslaved that was influential to the abolition movement.</p>
	<p>William Wilberforce (1759-1833) British politician and abolitionist. Wilberforce led the political campaign in Parliament by giving speeches about abolishing slavery.</p>
	<p>Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846) A British Abolitionist and key figure in the anti-slavery campaign. He collected evidence of the horrors of the slave trade to gain public support for abolition.</p>
	<p>Mary Anne Rawson (1801-1887) A leading female abolitionist in Sheffield. She wrote anti-slavery poems and helped to organise women's sugar boycotts and petitions.</p>
	<p>Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) A former enslaved African and abolitionist. Douglass escaped his enslavement and gave important speeches in Britain about ending slavery – he even visited Sheffield.</p>
	<p>Harriet Tubman (1822-1913) A former enslaved African and the conductor of the underground railroad. She escaped slavery but went back to plantations to help others escape.</p>

Vocabulary:

Transatlantic Slave Trade		The forced transportation of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas between the 16 th and 19 th Centuries.
Chattel Slavery		A system where enslaved people were treated as property who could be bought, sold and inherited. They had no rights or freedom.
Indentured Servitude		A labour system in which a person agreed to work for a set number of years in exchange for passage to land, often compared to but different to slavery.
Middle Passage		The journey from West Africa to the Americas which was known for its brutal conditions and high mortality rate.
Plantation		Large farms in the Americas where enslaved people were forced to grow crops like sugar, tobacco and cotton for trade with Britain.
Resistance		The refusal to follow orders. Enslaved people resisted their oppression by refusing to follow orders, escaping or fighting back.
Boycott		A method of protest by refusing to buy, use or participate in something to show you disagree with the way a country is treating others.
Abolition Campaign		The movement to end the slave trade and then slavery. It was led by activists who believed in human rights and freedoms for the enslaved.
Emancipation		The process of freeing enslaved people and ending slavery.
Legacy		The long lasting impact of an event from the past and how this continues to affect ideas, people and countries today.

<p>Lesson 1: What do artefacts reveal about the Kingdom of Benin before the Transatlantic trade in enslaved people?</p>	<p>Before the Transatlantic Slave Trade, West African kingdoms such as Benin were powerful, wealthy and highly organised. The Kingdom of Benin, in modern-day Nigeria, was known for its skilled bronze and ivory artwork, strong Obas (kings), and wide trading networks. These artefacts show that African societies were rich in culture, craftsmanship and political power long before European arrival, challenging racist stereotypes that Africa was “uncivilised.” The Benin Bronzes help historians understand African achievements on their own terms, before European exploitation began.</p>
<p>Lesson 2: How did the Transatlantic Slave Trade develop and where does Sheffield fit into this?</p>	<p>From the 1500s, European nations built a trading system that trafficked millions of Africans across the Atlantic. Britain soon dominated this trade by organising a “triangular trade” that connected Britain, West Africa and the Americas. Although Sheffield was not a port city, it became deeply involved by supplying metal goods such as knives, guns, cutlery and tools that were exchanged for enslaved Africans on the West African coast. These industries helped Sheffield grow, showing that the economic benefits of slavery spread far beyond coastal cities and shaped the development of inland industrial towns.</p>
<p>Lesson 3: What does the story of the Cannon Hall slave ship reveal about conditions for enslaved people on the Middle Passage?</p>	<p>In 1755, the <i>Cannon Hall</i> ship sailed to The Gambia to buy enslaved Africans. Unlike large slave ships designed to hold hundreds of people, this tiny vessel had only seven crew and was completely unfit for carrying human beings. Africans were forced aboard in cramped, filthy and airless conditions, chained together and exposed to disease, hunger and violence. European letters reveal chaos and neglect, and although they do not describe everything, some deaths may have been caused by assault or abuse. Twenty-one Africans died on the Atlantic crossing alone, and more died after arrival. In total, 54 of the 89 Africans forced on board were killed. The only records we have come from European crew and merchants, not the enslaved people, making this story a powerful reminder of how their suffering was recorded only through the voices of those who exploited them.</p>
<p>Lesson 4: What do sources reveal about how enslaved people resisted their captivity on plantations?</p>	<p>Despite brutal conditions, enslaved Africans resisted in many ways. They worked slowly, damaged tools, preserved African culture, escaped into forests, and organised revolts. Even ordinary plantation tools, such as the plantation hoe, carried double meanings: they were tools forced upon enslaved people but were also sometimes used in sabotage or resistance. Some plantation owners were “absentee landlords” who lived in Britain, including families linked to Sheffield’s wealthy cutlery and metal trades, meaning Sheffield benefitted indirectly while enslaved people resisted directly. These sources show that enslaved Africans were never passive: resistance was constant, courageous and diverse.</p>
<p>Lesson 5: What do maps reveal about how the Transatlantic trade in enslaved people shaped Sheffield's industrial development?</p>	<p>The transatlantic trade in enslaved people created huge demand for metal goods, and Sheffield’s growing industries supplied much of it. Cutlery, steelmakers, nail-makers, file-smiths, gun-makers and edge-tool producers all manufactured items used to buy enslaved Africans or to run plantations. Sheffield was also connected through sugar refining, which relied on sugar grown by enslaved labour. Mapping these connections shows that Sheffield’s economic success, from factories to workshops, was tied to slavery, even though enslaved people did not live in the city itself.</p>



<p>Lesson 6: What do petitions, pamphlets and poems reveal about Sheffield's connections to Abolition in 1807?</p>	<p>Sheffield became one of Britain's most active abolitionist centres. Local campaigners argued that slavery was immoral and demanded its end through petitions, public meetings and print culture. Women played a key role: abolitionists such as Hannah Rawson wrote powerful poems, organised sugar boycotts and helped create Sheffield's anti-slavery societies. Their activism shows that ordinary people in Sheffield contributed strongly to the national movement to abolish the trade in enslaved people.</p>
<p>Lesson 7: What do sources reveal about Sheffield's role in Emancipation and its aftermath?</p>	<p>The 1807 law ended Britain's involvement in transporting enslaved Africans, but slavery itself continued in the British Empire until 1833. Many things stayed the same: enslaved people remained on plantations, profits still flowed to Britain, and industries connected to slavery, including some in Sheffield, continued to benefit. What changed was the growing pressure for full emancipation, supported by speeches in Sheffield from formerly enslaved activists such as Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass, who argued for complete abolition. After 1833, enslavers received large sums of compensation, while formerly enslaved people received nothing, revealing who the government and society continued to prioritise.</p>
<p>Lesson 8: What do newspaper articles and letters reveal about Sheffield's response to the American Civil War?</p>	<p>When the American Civil War began in 1861, Sheffield's response was divided. Some manufacturers supported the Confederacy because they sold Bowie knives and steel tools to southern states, which were fighting to maintain slavery. Others supported the Union because it opposed slavery, even though the war caused shortages of cotton and disrupted local industries. Newspaper articles show a city debating ideas of freedom, labour and justice, revealing how global events shaped attitudes in Sheffield.</p>
<p>Lesson 9: What do memorials maps and museums reveal about the legacy of the Transatlantic trade in enslaved people on Sheffield?</p>	<p>Many of Sheffield's links to the slave trade still appear in its landscape — through street names, old industrial sites, business records, and families who gained wealth from slavery. Yet museums such as Kelham Island Museum display very little about this history, showing how the city is still deciding how to remember its past. Maps and memorials help us understand these hidden stories and raise questions about how Sheffield should commemorate its connections to slavery today.</p>
<p>Enquiry Outcome: Museum Exhibition Display</p>	<p>For the enquiry outcome, students will analyse a range of sources that reveal Sheffield's hidden connections to the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved People. They will then design a museum exhibition poster that explains these links and makes recommendations about how Sheffield should remember and present this difficult past.</p>

What do historians say?

How can I find out more?



A Fistful of Shells – Toby Green. (2019)

In his book, Toby Green examines the impact the transatlantic slave trade had on West Africa. It highlights how the Slave Trade disrupted thriving, complex societies and reshaped African economies and political systems. It shows the devastating cost of slavery yet challenges the Eurocentric view by showcasing Africa's rich history before colonialism.

Sugar in the Blood – Andrea Stuart. (2012)

In her book, Stuart explores how the Transatlantic Slave Trade shaped economies, societies and individuals through the story of her own family's plantation history in Barbados. She highlights the brutal exploitation of enslaved Africans, who were forcibly brought to the Caribbean to cultivate sugar. The book examines the human cost of slavery, how it shaped racism and its lasting legacy on the modern world.

BBC Bitesize:

Transatlantic Slave Trade



BBC Bitesize:

Experiences of Enslaved People



BBC Bitesize:

Abolition of the Slave Trade

