**Conducting a local history enquiry on the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade**

The legacy of the transatlantic slave trade on Reading, fascinating as it is, will not be something that teachers will want to teach with pressured curriculum time. This document shares the approach that I have taken in conducting the research for this enquiry, and advice on ways to go about doing the same for other towns or cities.

**Planning your enquiry**

I would thoroughly recommend reading the first chapter in Abdul Mohamud and Robin Whitburn’s *Doing Justice to History: transforming Black history in secondary schools* as a starting point for planning an enquiry on the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade; their ideas and approach strongly informed my approach in terms of the enquiry question and the focus and format of the lessons. Getting the enquiry question right is vital to the sequence of lessons working well – the question itself should show how rooted in local history the enquiry is, and going back to that question throughout the enquiry keeps the focus on the legacies of the trade relevant to the local area.

It was useful in Reading to be able to start this enquiry with a focus on a landmark that many students had seen but knew very little about. The Central Club Mural is recognisably part of Reading’s landscape, but very few students were able to say more than ‘it’s that painting near the cinema’. This meant that students were engaged with the enquiry, as they started by finding out about something familiar. Anecdotally it also led to many talking to their parents about what they were learning about in lessons, which was lovely. So, connecting a local history enquiry to something that students will recognise can be powerful. Throughout the enquiry there are references to physical parts of the local landscape that at least a proportion of the students recognised – this helped to maintain engagement, as students felt that they were finding out about a ‘secret’ or ‘hidden’ history that other people didn’t know (in many cases they were!). It also helps to demonstrate how much a part of everyday life the legacy of the slave trade is – that is something discussed explicitly that should also come across in every aspect of the enquiry.

I also found it useful to consider carefully how to engage students with the local history of those that benefited from the slave trade, as well as those who were the victims and those who opposed it. This meant that the students formed a broader understanding of the legacies of the slave trade, rather than thinking that Reading’s abolitionists or slave-owners alone represented Reading’s connections to the slave trade. I was pleased to also be able to include the names and stories of women involved in the slave trade, as this is something that many students do not expect. Looking at as many different elements of the legacies of the slave trade as possible was important for enabling students to argue that this history is relevant today, and for them to engage in the final task of designing a museum display. I did not want them to come away from the enquiry thinking that the legacies of the slave trade are only relevant to people today who identify in some way with those figures in the past who were involved (on either side). I wanted students to see that the history is relevant and important to everyone in Reading today because it is a part of Reading.

**The research story for this enquiry**

This enquiry really started when I found the ‘Reading’s slave links’ document produced by the Reading International Solidarity Centre in 2007. It was shared on this page: <http://antislavery.ac.uk/solr-search?facet=collection:%22Remembering+1807%22>, which may be a useful starting point for local history enquiries in other places. It has digitised all the Heritage Lottery Fund projects from the bicentenary celebrations of the ending of the slave trade. The document gave me a useful starting point for further research.

**Local libraries**

Another vitally important resource was my local library. I emailed the person in charge of local history at Reading Central Library, who recommended a few really useful books and was able to send some documents on the Central Club Mural, which were a significant part of the first lesson and the starting point of the enquiry. The librarian was happy to share what she knew about Reading’s slave links and was able to recommend books that became integral to the enquiry, such as *From Reading to Barbados and Back* by Stewart Johnson. I would really recommend getting in touch with your local library – if they do not know the places to look themselves, they are likely to be able to point you in the right direction.

**‘Legacies of British Slave-ownership’:** [**www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs**](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/)

This website could form the heart of any local enquiry into the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on a particular place. Using the search tools, you can see the cultural, economic and physical (and many more) legacies of the compensation pay-out in 1833, as well as documented slave-owners associated with particular locations. This helped me to find out about the Stapleton family associated with Greys Court (a National Trust house in Henley-on-Thames). Will Bailey Watson has started the ‘Meanwhile, nearby…’ homework tool, building on the success of ‘Meanwhile, elsewhere…’, which may also be a format for using the legacies site with students: [https://meanwhileelsewhereinhistory.wordpress.com/meanwhile-nearby](https://meanwhileelsewhereinhistory.wordpress.com/meanwhile-nearby/)

**‘Slave Voyages’:** [**www.slavevoyages.com**](http://www.slavevoyages.com)

This website is hugely useful for teaching the transatlantic slave trade in general, but if you want a local element you can use the search tool to look at the place in which ships were registered. You can also search by name of owners or investors, so if you have a name you can find out more about their involvement on this site.

**Local archives**

Having never conducted research in an archive before, I was a little nervous of this part, but it was much easier than I expected. I contacted the county archive, in this case the Berkshire Records Office, and explained what I was researching, arranging a time to visit. When I arrived, I discovered that the Black and Asians in Britain Association had already catalogued all the references to Black and Asian people in the area, some dating back as far as the seventeenth century. This was obviously immensely helpful, as I could look at more than the short list of examples that I had from the ‘Reading slave links’ document, and see those references in context. Getting in touch with the local record office and finding out whether anything similar has been done there might make this more accessible to busy and time-pressed teachers. It took me, and a colleague who came with me, about an hour to find several records of people in Berkshire in the 1700s (see Lesson 2), and it was a really great experience. I did have to apply for permission to use the resources, but this did not take long, as I simply had to send the document reference codes.

**Other places to look for local history research**

There are generic searches that you can use, such as The National Archives: [https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk](https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/). This will help you to locate specific records. If you do not have a specific record that you are looking for, you could try putting in ‘slavery + local area’ or ‘West Indies + local area’. This site would also be useful when you get further into research. For example, knowing the name ‘Robert Haynes’ meant that I can see a letter sent to him by Thomas Lane in 1806. Another useful resource, depending on the area, would be the Colonial Countryside Project ([https://colonialcountryside.wordpress.com/about-colonial-countryside](https://colonialcountryside.wordpress.com/about-colonial-countryside/)), which has got primary school children leading exploration into the colonial history of Britain’s stately homes. It is also possible to identify links to stately homes through the ‘Legacies of British Slave-ownership’ site, using the search function or the map. For example, this links to a reference of an owner of the National Trust property Grey’s Court, which is used in Lesson 3: [www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146644085](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146644085). This can be found by putting ‘grey’s court’ into the ‘notes’ search bar in ‘advanced search’.

**Online databases**

There are several online databases, which make researching the legacies of the slave trade far easier than trying to get to physical archives and records.

* The ‘Runaway Slaves’ project (www.runaways.gla.ac.uk), which is useful for establishing the presence of black people in different local areas
* ‘Reconnecting diverse rural communities’ (www.nottingham.ac.uk/isos/research/rural-legacies.aspx), which includes some useful mapping tools
* ‘The Legacies of British Slave-ownership’ ([www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs))
* ‘Slave Voyages’ ([www.slavevoyages.com](http://www.slavevoyages.com))