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THE SLAVE TRADE, ABOLITION AND PUBLIC MEMORY

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ABSTRACT. The bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807 prompted a remarkable wave of public commemorations across Britain. In contrast to the low-key events of 1907, 2007 saw a sustained and nation-wide urge to commemorate, publicise and discuss the Atlantic slave trade and its abolition. Government interest proved an important influence, and was reflected in a lively educational debate (resulting in changes to the National Curriculum.) This political interest may have stemmed from the parallel debate about modern human trafficking, and contemporary slave systems. Equally, the availability of funding (from the Heritage Lottery Fund) may have persuaded a host of institutions to devise exhibitions, displays and debates about events of 1807. Perhaps the most striking forms of commemoration were in broadcasting and publishing: the BBC was especially active. There were few regions or localities which remained unaffected by the year's commemorations.

But why was there such interest? Was 1807, with the outlawing of an unquestioned evil, seen as a moment of national virtue? But if so, how are we to recall the role played by the British in the *perfection* of Atlantic slavery and the slave trade? The lively debates in 2007, from major national institutions to small local gatherings, revealed the problematic nature of abolition itself. After all, slavery survived, and even the slave trade continued after 1807. So what was important about 1807? The commemorations of 2007 raised public awareness about an important transformation in the British past; it also exposed those intellectual and political complexities about the ending of the Atlantic slave trade which have proved so fascinating to academic historians.

2007 marked the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade, an anniversary characterised by remarkably varied and numerous commemorations. But what happened in 2007 stood in marked contrast to 1907, when the centenary of abolition was a modest affair. Compared to the plethora of events in 2007, the centenary registered only the slightest flicker of remembrance. The leader in *The Times* on 25 March 1907 for example commemorated, not the Act of Abolition, but the Act of Union.[1] Understandably, The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society – descendant of the original anti-slavery movement in the 1820s – took up the issue, and recalled that abolition had been 'an event of the

[1] *Times*, 25 Mar. 1907.

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highest importance' but even that society was more concerned about events in the Congo.[2] It is true that a service was held in Westminster Abbey – and Africans celebrated in Sierra Leone[3] – but the Anti-Slavery Society remained more agitated about contemporary slave systems – and slave-trading routes in and from Africa: the Act of 1807 was mentioned largely in passing, and under the shadow of more momentous, immediate issues.[4]

It was all very different in 2007. The bicentenary of the 1807 abolition prompted a remarkable wave of commemorations across Britain – sometimes in the most unexpected of places. Few major public institutions failed to offer their own, distinctive or local interpretation of the events leading to the Act of 1807. Government departments (and the prime minister and his deputy) took an active interest, and there was even a debate in parliament about the abolition of the slave trade.[5] TV and radio disgorged countless programmes on abolition: the BBC also created a string of excellent websites.[6] Discussions about abolition, essays and commentaries filled the press (including some of the tabloids), and bookshop windows were crowded with new publications devoted to the end of the slave trade. The sheer volume of abolitionist commemorations surprised even those scholars prepared for a busy year.[7] This public interest in abolition was, to a degree, driven forward by the remarkable coverage given to abolition in the press, TV and radio. But whatever the source or inspiration, public interest in abolition was extraordinary, with tens of thousands trooping through various exhibitions and large numbers of school children bussed to those same events. The exhibition in Westminster Hall for example attracted more than 100,000 visitors. The Equiano exhibition in Birmingham attracted 30,000.[8] I had been speaking in public on the topic for years and had never previously met such widespread attention: large, interested crowds, well-informed and critical questions, and a genuine attention to the broader issues.

As the year unfolded, and as the public debate became more voluble (especially towards the end of March 2007 – the actual anniversary of the 1807 Act), it was clear enough that ever more people were not

[2] *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, fourth series, 27 (1907), 'Annual Report', 1907, 2–12.

[3] *Ibid.*, 41–5.

[4] *Times*, 23 Mar. 1907.

[5] *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*, Tuesday 20 Mar. 2007, vol. 458, no. 64, cols. 687–780.

[6] www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition.

[7] I had decided to set aside the year for abolition activities. In the end I did eighty-nine lectures on the topic at a range of gatherings, from local libraries through to national institutions and international venues.

[8] Figures provided by the curators, Melanie Unwin (parliament) and Clare Weston (Birmingham). For parliament see also http://slavetrade.parliament.uk/slavetrade.

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only interested in Britain's slaving past, but they were confused and sometimes troubled by it. What had initially seemed, to many people, an opportunity to commemorate – celebrate even – abolition, had broadened into a growing realisation that the slave trade and abolition were more problematic than it appeared at first sight. This realisation was also apparent in the planning of a number of abolition exhibitions.[9] In the necessarily protracted build-up required for major exhibitions (roughly two years to plan and effect the major 1807–2007 displays) the complexities of abolition became clearer. Many of the groups convened to plan for the commemorations felt, at first, that 2007 could provide a 'feel-good' moment: one of those historical remembrances which showed the British at their best. Who could deny that the slave trade was bad – and that abolition was good and that the British had led the way? 1807 could, then, be commemorated as an example of British historical virtue: an episode when all sorts and conditions of British people came together to overthrow an indisputable scourge. Yet scratch the surface of the story of abolition and the slave trade and it is immediately apparent that the story is more complex, more troublesome and in many respects quite different from the popular imagination. Some simple points confirm those complexities.

First, if we were to commemorate the British Abolition Act of 1807, how should we incorporate the story of the British slave trading in the century *before* 1807: the period when the British became the dominant Atlantic slave trader? More than three and a half million Africans had been transported across the Atlantic in British ships in that period. Moreover, by the last years of the British trade, one African in five was carried in a ship from Liverpool.[10] Similarly – though this was often overlooked in the public debate in 2007 – the British slave system continued long *after* 1807. Full emancipation for Britain's slaves did not materialise until 1838, and even then, only at a cost of £20 million paid (not to the slaves) but to the slave holders. Moreover slavery continued to thrive elsewhere, notably in the USA until 1865: in Brazil it was not abolished until 1888.[11] Even then, the British, though flushed by an anti-slavery culture after 1838, and apparently determined to end slavery world-wide, were not averse to the reintroduction of Indian indentured labour into the Caribbean (and other possessions) to fill the labouring gaps created by the departed freed slaves.[12] Nor did the slave trade end in 1807. An 'illicit' slave trade – though hounded by the American and British navies – saw almost three

[9] I was adviser/guest curator for the Equiano Exhibition at the Birmingham Museums and Galleries, and at the parliamentary exhibition in Westminster Hall.

[10] See *Liverpool and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, ed. David Richardson, Suzanne Schwarz and Anthony Tibbles (Liverpool, 2008).

[11] For the broad history of slavery, see David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage* (New York, 2006).

[12] Howard Temperley, *After Slavery: Emancipation and its Discontent* (2000).

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million Africans shipped across the Atlantic, mainly to Cuba and Brazil.[13] Stated simply, the Act of 1807 did not stop the Atlantic slave trade, nor did it end slavery in the Americas.

The story of abolition becomes even more confusing when we consider the 1807 Act itself. It is true that the Act represented a remarkable political (and social) change in British political interests. But how should we weigh that transformation in the balance alongside the many dozens of Acts *promoting* slave trading and passed by the British parliament between, say, 1672 and 1800? The British parliament was a confirmed slave-trading legislature long before it established a reputation for its abolitionist impulses.[14] Of course these Acts form a specific example of a more general point: that slave trading was part of the British economic and cultural landscape from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. Any number of major institutions (from the monarchy downwards) had involved themselves in slave trading – and it was easy to see why: the material benefits of the slave trade and slavery could be seen across Britain. Most striking in the buoyant ports which fed and benefited from the trade, from Glasgow to Bristol, the slave trade seeped into the most unusual and unexpected corners of British life. It was most visible in the universal consumption of slave-grown sugar,[15] it could even be detected in a number of stately homes acquired courtesy of the fruits of Atlantic trade and enslaved African labour.[16]

Such simple facts, well known to historians, were often startling to many who first came to discuss abolition prior to 2007 and the ensuing debates served to complicate the process of how to commemorate 1807. How could a gallery or museum present a visiting public with the complexities not merely of the Act of 1807, but of the broader world of slavery and slave trading? Add to this, the problems of physical space, finance and time and it was clear that public historians were faced by a complex brew of decisions. One important decision, taking by a large number of institutions, helped to simplify the problem of how to commemorate 1807. Many agreed not simply to tell the *general* story – not to recite the history of the abolition movement culminating in the Act of 1807 – but

[13] For these and all other details, see the TransAtlantic Slave Trade Data Base, www.slavevoyages.org.

[14] William Pettigrew, 'Parliament and the Escalation of the Slave Trade, 1690–1714', in *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People*, ed. Stephen Farrell, Melanie Unwin and James Walvin, Edinburgh University Press for Parliamentary History Yearbook Trust (Edinburgh, 2007).

[15] James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire. Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660–1800* (1997), ch. 8.

[16] S. D. Smith, *Slavery, Family and Gentry Capitalism in the British Atlantic. The World of the Lascelles, 1648–1834* (Cambridge, 2006).

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to speak to a specific and often a local case study.[17] There seemed little point repeating, in varied settings around the country, the broad history of abolition. Once taken, that decision had the effect of forcing local groups, and local institutions, to find a *specific* or a local *entrée* into the abolition story. Organisers began to ask: let us try to speak, for example, to abolition in Manchester, the north-east or East Anglia. Parliament, quite properly, sought to tell the parliamentary story. In Birmingham, the municipal exhibition concentrated on the remarkable study of one man – the African, Olaudah Equiano. Thus it was that local museums and galleries approached abolition through local or regional interests, or through an engagement with materials which were strongly represented in their holdings. English Heritage for example used Lord Mansfield's home – Kenwood House – as a setting for a discussion of abolition. The Wisbech and Fenlands Museum focused on the life of the local abolitionist hero Thomas Clarkson. Hull inevitably did much the same with Wilberforce. The end result was an extraordinary mosaic of very different activities and commemorations: the Royal Mail issued six abolition stamps (containing two African faces) and the Royal Mint issued a commemorative two pound coin.[18] Small schools displayed pupils' drawings and comments on the slave trade while at the other, grander extreme, the archbishop of Canterbury preached about the slave trade before the queen and prime minister in Westminster Abbey.[19]

Although it was perhaps the nation's major institutions – parliament, the National Portrait Gallery, the British Museum[20] – which inevitably caught the eye, some of the most revealing responses to 1807 were to be found in smaller places: local schools, local authorities and small town libraries.[21] From such local initiatives there emerged an astonishing profusion of printed and graphic materials: pamphlets, posters, booklets, essays, books. And it was there, often far removed from the major ebb and flow of mainstream slave business, in London and the major ports, that some of the most revealing displays were to be found. They also yielded

[17] The BBC played an active role, through their local/regional stations in encouraging scrutiny of local slavery connections. See e.g. www.bbc.co.uk/norfolk/abolition; www.bbc.co.uk/Isle of Man; bbc.co.uk/somerset/abolition.

[18] For a list of the major events, see *Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, 1807–2007* (HM Government, 2007), 14–15.

[19] *Service to Commemorate the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act*, Tuesday 27 Mar. 2007.

[20] The major abolition events for the year can be found in *Calendar of Events, 2007, Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act*, published by the Dept for Communities and Local Government, 2007.

[21] Among the many pamphlets published by local authorities see Kirklees Council, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 2007, City of Westminster, *Abolition of the Slave Trade Events to Mark the Bicentenary of the 1807 Act of Parliament*, 2007; *Connecting Histories*, Birmingham City Council, 2007.

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some of the most original discussions about abolition. Who normally thinks of East Anglia having links with Atlantic slavery? And what sort of connections are normally made between the north-east and the enslaved Atlantic? Yet by dint of committed local effort (and often unflagging application by a small local band of enthusiasts) serious research was undertaken in local holdings, and a persuasive case was made for the importance of local slave-trading connections. Although it may be felt that this merely confirms what we have known for a long time – that Atlantic slavery reached into all corners of British life – such local and regional studies, in support of public exhibitions, confirmed, via careful research, details which are often missing. Local ships heading to the slave colonies, local industries tied to slavery (coal to the plantations for instance) returning planters migrating 'home' to East Anglia. What began as an effort to give 1807 a *local* context thus evolved into an important statement not merely of regional entanglement with slavery, but also helped to fill in some of the gaps in our broader understanding of Atlantic slavery and of abolition.[22]

As if all this were not enough to satisfy the public curiosity about abolition, a major film (*Amazing Grace)* and a number of plays, notably *Rough Crossings* (adapted by Caryl Phillips from Simon Schama's book of the same name) offered theatrical versions of the abolition story. For those in need of still further information, bookshop windows were filled with books aimed at the 'abolitionist moment' of 2007. Publishers had clearly planned to capitalise on the interest in abolition in 2007.[23] The end result was that there was a huge number of access points to the history of abolition, from across the entire British cultural landscape. Most departments of the BBC (including comedy) offered something on abolition. By March 2007 it was as if there was a blanket cultural coverage of the topic, in every conceivable format: publishing, the press, TV and radio, film and theatre, websites, libraries, museums, galleries, archives, churches – and politics. By the end of March, and the actually anniversary itself, it was almost impossible to avoid the public discussion about the abolition of the slave trade. It is hard to think of a comparable historical anniversary attracting such ubiquitous, wide-ranging cultural and social attention. Quite *why* this happened remains perplexing: what is/was so *special* about abolition to spawn such commemorations? Some suggestions are worth considering.

First, there was the prospect of money. The availability of funding, via the Heritage Lottery Fund, to commemorate abolition was undoubtedly

[22] For a very good example, see John Charlton, *Hidden Chains. The Slavery Business and North East England, 1600–1865* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2008).

[23] My own book, *A Short History of Slavery* (2007), delivered to the publishers in 2005, was 'parked' for a year by Penguin in order to hit the abolitionist market in 2007.

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a powerful incentive. Institutions assembled abolitionist proposals in the hope of attracting HLF funding, and thereby being able to host an exhibition or display. By March 2008 the HLF had made 270 awards amounting to a total of £15 million.[24] But how far the prospects of HLF funding had *inspired* the initial decision to plan a commemoration of 1807 is impossible to say. The other major 'cultural broker' was the BBC, and there again the key decisions taken within the BBC to address abolition flowed from a variety of sources. Heads of major departments clearly took a policy decision that they should find an appropriate way of discussing abolition (as news, drama or live discussion for example). The build-up to 2007 coincided with a period when the BBC awaited the government's latest decision on the Corporation's licence fee: the need for the BBC to present a socially responsive front was doubtless a factor in discussions within the BBC.

Across all this activity there was cast a political shadow. Tony Blair's government showed a keen interest in the bicentenary of abolition. A committee was established, chaired by the deputy prime minister, John Prescott, and consisting of prominent figures from various bicentenary organisations and institutions. It met regularly to monitor national plans for 2007, and to see in what ways the government might help the process. It was a curious affair: a senior cabinet member (other ministers stood in when Prescott was unavailable) taking time out of a busy schedule to listen to broadcasters, directors, curators, clerics and academics discussing plans for 2007. Yet why should a government have *any* interest in such an arcane historical event?

The prime minister himself provided the best evidence for the government's interest in abolition. In 'A message from the Prime Minister', Blair wrote:

> This anniversary is a chance for all of us to deepen understanding of our heritage, celebrate the richness of our diversity and increase our determination to shape the world with the values we share. I hope you will get involved in some way. There should be something for everyone. This is everyone's bicentenary.[25]

All this came at a time when issues of *contemporary* slave trading were of political concern. Human trafficking had, again, established itself as a major global problem, via a string of incidents, confirming the contemporary enforced movement of people from poor regions to the west, for labour or for prostitution. It was as if the historical example of 1807 offered a beacon of what might be achieved if people of good will and political resolve put their strength behind a campaign. During, 2007, the British government was edging towards signing up to the European

[24] Information kindly provided by Dr Fiona Spiers, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund, Yorkshire and Humberside.

[25] 'A Message from the Prime Minister', *Calendar of Events*.

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Convention against Human Trafficking. They finally signed in December 2008, to the ringing words of the home secretary 'I strongly believe the trafficking of human beings is one of the vilest crimes to threaten our society.'[26] William Wilberforce would have been happy to hear it.

There was more to Blair's government interest than this however. Here was a government which was openly committed to 'social inclusion', and especially to a concerted effort to ensure that racial equality was observed at all levels of British life.[27] This, in alliance with the influence of a number of prominent black politicians in Blair's cabinet, ensured that the bicentenary had a strong contemporary appeal in Westminster. It was as if the historical events culminating in abolition in 1807 resonated with a number of modern-day political issues. Human trafficking, social inclusion, the drive for racial equality, all came together to provide good reasons to give strong political support to the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade.

There were, of course, other factors which lent themselves to the public interest in 1807. British black communities – not a factor in 1907 – had their own interest in the slave trade and abolition, and found a particular voice through local community churches and related organisations. Black churches addressed 1807 in their own distinctive fashion, often via day schools or religious services. When the mayor of London organised a day school devoted to 1807–2007 it concentrated on the role of the churches in the slave trade. The day was, not surprisingly, dominated by black churches and black preachers from across the capital.[28] This community-based interest in abolition was a highly appropriate reminder of what had happened after 1787. Then, the bedrock of popular abolition in its earliest phase (say, 1787–92) had been in British dissenting chapels, notably Methodists and Baptists.[29] And so it was in 2007. There was a neat, and not altogether accidental symmetry here, bringing the original abolition campaign into line with a contemporary campaign of black commemoration.

Throughout 2007, the abundance of abolitionist activities served a number of purposes. It provided a convenient forum for political interest at the centre of government, it offered an ideal opportunity for the allocation of funds from the Heritage Lottery Fund and it presented the BBC with an ideal opportunity to fulfil its obligations as a public service broadcaster. Even so, these factors do not fully explain the depth and ubiquity of activity in 2007. Whatever the *specific* inspiration behind this or that exhibition, there was a genuine groundswell of public interest

[26] Home Office, *Press Release*, 17 Dec. 2008.
[27] *Reaching Out. An Action Plan on Social Inclusion*, Cabinet Office, Sept. 2006.
[28] *In God's Name. The Role of the Church in the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, City Hall, Aug. 2007.
[29] Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery* (Pittsburgh, 1986).

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in 1807. This may have been merely a particular aspect of that general and broadly based British popular interest in history: in local, family, regional, military or even celebrity history. The culture of lecture-going, the remarkable array of historical-based groups across Britain found a new focus for their curiosity in 2007. But the abolitionist bicentenary went further even than this. What emerged, as the year progressed, was the realisation that behind abolition lay the slave trade and slavery. There was a growing appreciation, among large numbers of people, of an issue which historians themselves had slowly come to accept over, say, the past forty years: that the enslaved Atlantic was central not merely to the Americas or Africa – but to Britain itself.

The story of African enslavement, of the Atlantic slave ships and of the plantation societies of the Americas might seem distant to the British. Viewed from Britain, here are topics which seem designed more for Africanists, naval scholars or historians of the Americas. Yet Atlantic slavery was driven forward by British commercial and political forces. In return, Britain derived huge economic and social benefits. Nor were those interests – or benefits – to be seen merely in the great slave ports (London, Bristol or Liverpool for example). The broader British economy, the financial systems of London (banking, finance and insurance, global credit arrangements and capital accumulation) all were enmeshed with Atlantic slavery.[30] And so too was British social life. What could be more British than a sweet cup of tea? (The Chinese tea made palatable to British tastes by the addition of slave-grown sugar from the Caribbean.) As the abolition debate developed in 2007, it became clear that African slavery was a critical factor in helping the transformation of eighteenth-century Britain. Moreover, slavery in the Americas was itself made possible by the Atlantic slave ships, and the dominant slave-trading power by the mid- and late eighteenth century was Britain. Yet all this raises the enigma which has troubled historians – and more recently a broader public – for years. If all this was true, if slavery and the slave trade were indeed so central, there remains the curious issue of why did the British end it? If the slave trade was so buoyant and profitable (and current data suggests it was) why did the British turn against it? The simple question remains: why *was* the slave trade abolished in1807? Thus, what had seemed a simple bicentenary, exposed an interested public to a major historical debate and conundrum.

This is a debate which takes us well beyond the slave trade itself, engaging as it does the changes which were at work at the heart of Britain in the late eighteenth century. Any understanding of the politics of abolition in 1807 becomes not merely a parliamentary story, personified in popular memory by Wilberforce, but inevitably turns into a discussion

[30] Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2007).

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about the nature of abolition itself.[31] Here was a popular movement which was literate, dissenting, radical and often female. It was, equally, influenced by an African voice – an African agency – which helped to shape the origins and development of abolition politics. African voices, and African experiences – most notably the horrors endured in the belly of British slave ships – became a basic element in the campaign against the slave trade after 1783. It began in 1783 with news about the murder of Africans on the Liverpool slave ship *Zong*,[32] and gathered pace in the primary data teased out of the slave statistics, and from the voices of slave sailors, by Thomas Clarkson.[33] This raw, brutal data – first-hand accounts of the sufferings created by the slave ships, widely circulated in cheap or free pamphlet literature, and hammered home in crowded lectures across Britain, was hugely influential in shifting British opinion towards abolition.

In 2007 the complexity of abolition was, at once, appealing and yet difficult. How to grapple with it, present it, simplify it for, say, visitors to a gallery or museum? But the public debate about abolition in 2007 also meant that the British public were confronted not simply by a story about the slave trade and abolition, but by a compelling historical narrative that went right to the heart of British history itself. This, in its turn, struck a chord in the often confusing debate about 'identity'. Older, popular images of a benign British empire which brought the blessings of freedom to all corners of the world seemed hugely tarnished when set alongside the history of slavery and the slave trade. Brutality and violence were not so much an incidental by-product of the Atlantic slave empire, but its very essence. Along with other maritime and imperial Europeans, the British visited extraordinary damage on the peoples and societies of Africa in order to provide cheap labour to tap the potential of the tropical and semi-tropical Americas. The benefits to the British were clear and indisputable. But those benefits were acquired at the cost of staggering levels of suffering endured by millions of Africans.

How, then, are we to blend this story of Atlantic slavery into the broader narrative of Britain's imperial story? Equally, what does the history of slavery reflect on the history of the British in that first phase of imperial expansion and global domination in the eighteenth century? At one level the history of Atlantic slavery seems to be geographically distant. Yet the major thrust of much recent work on the slave trade has been to confirm the degree to which the slave trade (and the slave communities shaped by that trade) was integral to the British experience in the eighteenth century.

[31] For the origins of abolition see Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital* (Chapel Hill, 2006).

[32] This is the subject of my forthcoming book, *The Zong. One Ship in the Age of Slavery* (2010).

[33] Ellen Gibson Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson. A Biography* (1989).

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Slavery was, to use a phrase I have employed *ad nauseum*, as British as a sweet cup of tea.

This point was vividly captured in one of the best exhibitions spawned by the bicentenary, in the Museum in Docklands, 'London, Sugar and Slavery' (suitably housed in an old sugar warehouse). Via a careful blend of words, artefacts and images, a complex historical process was presented, illustrating how an exotic produce (sugar) cultivated by enslaved Africans, became an unquestioned and everyday feature of domestic British life.

2007 was, then, a quite remarkable historical commemoration. But unlike most such events, it is destined to leave an important legacy of its own. Two aspects in particular seem destined to survive. First, some of the projects, launched to find a local opportunity to discuss 1807–2007, have spawned on-going, serious research projects into the links between a region and Atlantic slavery. More significantly perhaps, the study of slavery has begun to settle into the National Curriculum. In effect, the study of slavery and the slave trade has shifted from the edges of historical concern to occupy a central location not merely among professional historians, but as a major theme in the British popular historical imagination.

In 1907, the Abolition Act of a century before had seemed a worthy change. By 2007 that same Act represented a massive upheaval which also spoke to a range of present-day British issues. The British abolition of the slave trade seemed more relevant, more resonant and more significant in 2007 than it had a century before. And to explain that fully, we need to engage with British society of the early twenty-first century.

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