

Canal Stories

An essay by

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regarding: 'Canals & Transatlantic Slavery' a preliminary review
Dr Jodie Matthews, Honorary Research Fellow, Canal & River Trust

In May 1861 the *Liverpool Mercury* reported the death of 'a coloured man' who was killed after a racially motivated attack on the city's streets. Lizzy Carpenter, who spoke as a witness during the case, told how the man, who she had chatted to before, had come to speak to her as she sat on the steps of her home in the Vauxhall area of the city, but their conversation had been interrupted by John Gallagher demanding to know what business the man had 'speaking to a white woman.' Lizzy could not say what happened next, but she testified Gallagher had returned to her house, wet and dirty, confessing he had thrown the Black man into the canal and pushed him down beneath the water. The magistrate ordered a section of the canal be emptied, but no body was found and Gallagher was eventually discharged.

I have friends who for a few years lived on a canal boat moored near Marylebone in London. Trips on their floating home were a joy, even in the rain. Pushing slowly through the still waters of the canals in London offered a wholly different view of the city, one experienced at a completely different pace to journeys along other highways and byways. The quieter soundscapes of the canals now can make it hard to imagine them as the bustling channels of an industrialising nation. They do not broadcast the stories of labour, kinship, conviviality, conflict, power, misery or grief that such routes inevitably hold. Nor do these quiet waterways advertise their links to the particularly vicious histories of Transatlantic slavery.

As Jodie Matthew's report highlights, the canal network had the blood of enslavement powering its own veins and suggests ways these histories of transport can be interrogated. Drawing on research from the Legacies of British Slave Ownership database and beyond, the report presents examples that show the links between canal companies and plantation interests in the West Indies. The profits made from the work of enslaved people who toiled upon the plantations enabled investments in canals across Britain from Preston to the Forth and Clyde. These connections do make 'Black histories' to be considered only of interest to Black Britain, but are British histories in the clearest sense.

The enslaved produced raw materials and goods desired by consumers in Britain with tobacco, imported from Virginia, and sugar both transported along the canals. A few of those who produced such goods may have also seen them travel along the canals. Matthew presents a few examples here of formerly enslaved men who we can tantalisingly imagine could have witnessed the building and use of canals in the parts of Britain where they settled. It is hard to imagine that the Black individuals who established their lives in working

class port communities would not have been part of canal communities to some extent; their stories are waiting to be surfaced.

The man unnamed in the *Liverpool Mercury* speaks to many of these threads and how these complex historical geographies of politics, economy and culture come together in the histories of the Black presence in Britain. In the report, Matthew references Gikandi's (2011) work which quotes the slave owner and Liverpool Mayor Thomas Golightly. He campaigned against the abolition of enslavement and observed in 1788 that infrastructural improvements like canals which sustained the slave trade, sustained Liverpool and the country at large. The canals were the reason for the suffering of many too, those on the plantations who never knew what benefits to others their labour brought, those unknown Black men and women who may have worked on them and those who were pushed beneath its waters. But, there is also in the unnamed man's story in the *Mercury* the possibilities of conviviality and friendship in the working class neighbourhoods that were established around and on the canals. But the cutting short of his tale, whether he survived or not, reminds us of how few of these stories are known and how many individuals are still waiting to become part of the deep histories that run through the still waters of Britain's canals.

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