Mahogany: a historical geography of a lasting and still valued commodity of 18th Century enslavement

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Abstract

It might be assumed that the commodities produced by enslaved labour in the British colonies in the 18th Century are consumed long ago. Mahogany however endures and challenges this assumption. Slave labour was used to cut mahogany trees and prepare the timber for transporting to European and North American markets. When made into fine furniture and fittings this same mahogany has been admired and preserved through to the present day. We explore how mahogany was part of the geography of colonial trade and wealth making through drawing on research focused on Lancaster in North-West England, the UK's fourth largest slave port. We trace the extended geographies and lines of connection that were produced by the interlinked trades in enslaved Africans and mahogany wood and through focusing on Lancaster we provide an example of how colonialism shaped the economy and narrative of places in Britain. Contemporary responses within heritage settings and implications for the continuing trade in antique mahogany furniture are considered.

Introduction

Whilst there are many legacies from the history of colonialism and slavery for geographers to engage with, including as part of decolonisation initiatives (Puttick and Murrey 2020), we might assume that the commodities that enslaved people were labouring to produce are long gone. For the British colonies in the West Indies the principal commodity was sugar, which along with other plantation crops - tobacco, coffee and cotton - was not intended to last for any length of time, its value being secured through its consumption. While there is, therefore, much attention being paid to the wealth made from slavery and passed on through families and institutions (Church Commissioners for England 2023, Hall et al. 2014) and to the deep and ongoing economic and cultural harm inflected on enslaved and colonised communities

(Beckles 2019, Mathews 2017), the commodities that were central to slave economies do not seem to demand our attention in any direct and material way.

Mahogany however challenges this assumption. Wood was amongst the cargoes of ships plying their trade between colonising countries and colonised territories with mahogany in particular becoming highly valued during the 18th Century when enslavement was at its height (Anderson, 2015). Slave labour was used to cut mahogany trees and prepare the timber for transporting and selling. When transformed from raw timber into the panelling, doors and ornate fittings of public buildings and grand houses, or into fine tables, chairs and writing desks, this same mahogany has been admired and preserved through to the present day (Walvin, 2017). Popular stately homes and museums proudly display the craftsmanship and heritage of famous cabinet makers of the period (Osborne, 2021), while antique dealers continue to buy and sell furniture made from colonial mahogany for sometimes tens of thousands of pounds, with little to no acknowledgement of their material provenance in the slave economy. As a commodity of enslavement, mahogany is therefore still with us, bringing it directly and materially into contemporary practices and experience and providing a distinctive entry point into studying the geography of colonial enslavement and trading practices.

To explore how mahogany was part of colonial trade and wealth making and discuss the issues this raises, we draw on research focused on a particular place in the UK caught up in that trade. Lancaster in North-West England was the UK's fourth largest slave port (Elder, 1992) after London, Liverpool and Bristol and also home to one of the country's high quality furniture makers, meaning that mahogany notably figured in cargoes returning to the port. We drew from various shipping, local and business archives, using focused strategies of concentrating on particular ship journeys or periods of time, in order to exemplify different aspects of the interconnections between mahogany and slavery and to trace the geography of flows of cargo, and of the relationships between the people involved directly and indirectly in this trade. This research was in collaboration with a broader programme of community research, communication and education by the Lancaster Black History Group, established in 2020 as part of local response to the Black Lives Matter movement (LBHG, 2024).

We begin by outlining how mahogany as a commodity was part of the slave economy, before then focusing in on Lancaster and the geography of its involvement in the making and selling of mahogany end-products.

Mahogany and slavery

In the 18th Century mahogany from the West Indies became much sought after as an 'exotic' hardwood – a so-called 'mahogany mania' (Anderson, 2015) of the period. Jamaica was the primary source of Britain's mahogany supply and the most profitable British colony, only matched by the brutality of its use of imported slave labour, with more than 90% of the population living in bondage (Burnard, 2015). In the first half of the 18th Century, the island was rapidly deforested both to clear land for plantations and to harvest timber from its mahogany forests. Ecologically rich landscapes and traditional ways of living with the forests were radically disrupted and destroyed (Anderson, 2004). Once cut down the very slow rate of growth of the vast trees - up to 100 feet tall and 12 feet thick - meant that mahogany had to be sourced from other places nearby including British Honduras (now Belize), but Jamaica remained at the centre of mahogany transhipment. The labour of locating and cutting the vast trees was carried out by teams of enslaved labourers (mainly African, but also some indigenous), who were sent out to find a good specimen, fell it using axes, trim and cut it into sections and planks (see Figure 1), clear a path for transportation, and move the tree ideally via the nearest waterway to the coast (Finamore, 2008; Anderson, 2015). The prepared mahogany was then loaded onto ships as cargo, often along with other commodities. This labour was skilled but hard and dangerous and part of the brutal system of owning and treating slaves as property and controlling them with fear and violence that was integral to the running of colonial society.

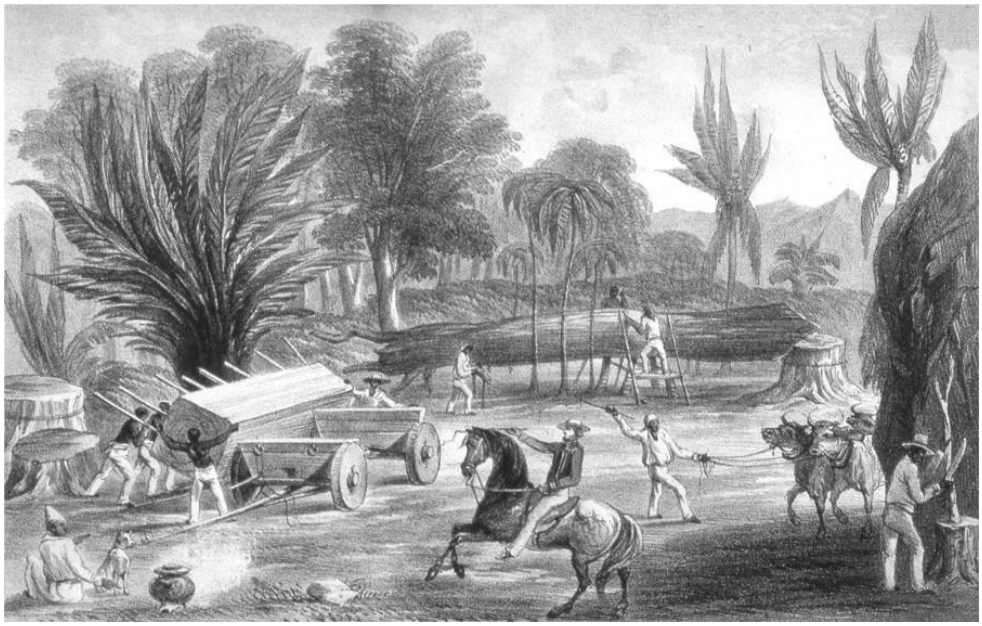

Figure 1: Cutting and Trucking Mahogany in Honduras (by Day and Son in Chaloner and Fleming, *The Mahogany Tree*, Liverpool: Rockliff and Son)

Ships carrying mahogany cargoes were part of bi-lateral trade going directly backward and forward to European or North American markets, but a significant number were undertaking ‘triangular’ slave trading journeys also involving a ‘middle passage’ from Africa to the West Indies. An example is the *Norfolk* a ship registered at Lancaster in 1763, owned by William Butterfield part of a well-known family of Lancaster merchants and slave traders (Elder, 1992). On its first slave trade journey (see Figure 2) it left Lancaster in September 1763, carrying goods to be traded for enslaved people (such as wool, silk products, gunpowder, lead and iron bars). It travelled to the Iles des Los an island setting of the West Coast of Africa, where Miles Barber a merchant born in Lancaster had established a set of dockyards and ‘bulking centres’ for holding enslaved Africans (Mouser, 1996). Two hundred and thirty-six Africans were forced onto the *Norfolk* (Slave Voyages, 2024). Of these an estimated thirty-four did not survive the long journey to Jamaica, the ship arriving into in Kingston in October 1764.

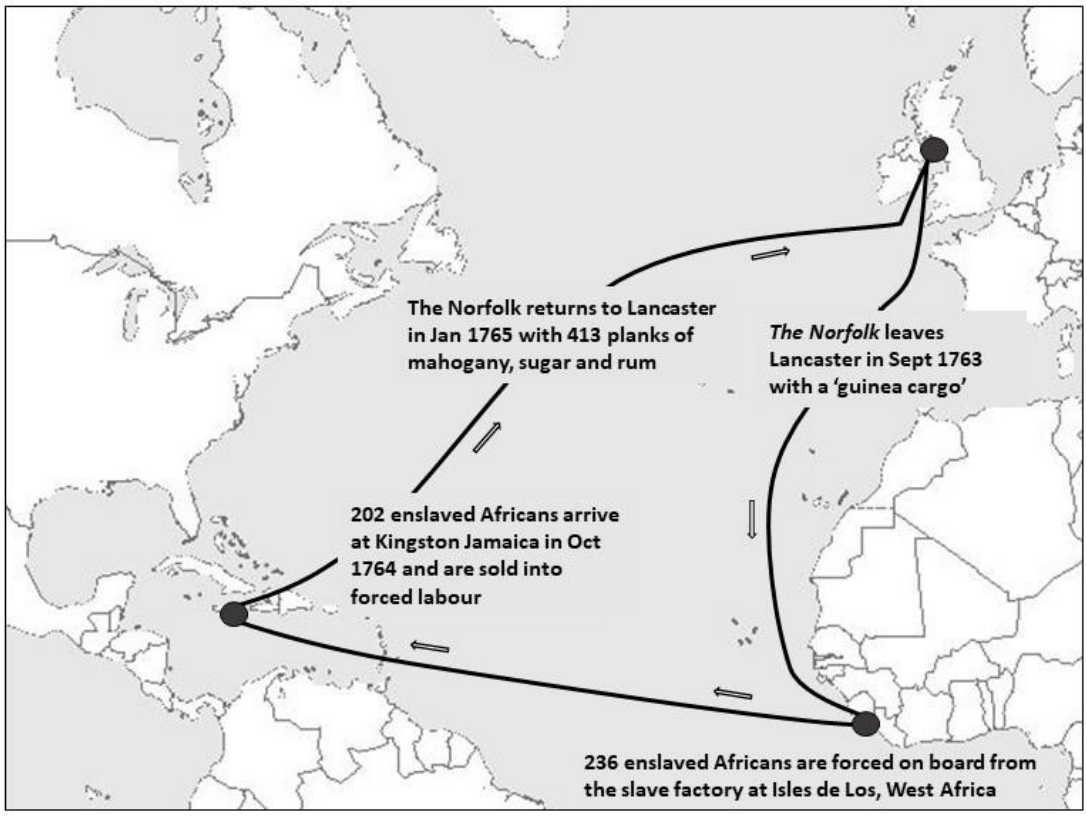

Figure 2: The triangular transatlantic journey of the *Norfolk* slave ship 1763-1765

The cargo of the *Norfolk* on arriving at Kingston is recorded in Naval Office Shipping Lists (National Archives, 2016) as '*202 negroes*', who would then have been sorted by age, gender and health status and sold on by factors (local slave merchants) into working for their owners on plantations, or into other forms of forced labour including mahogany cutting. Figure 3 shows the standard categories of cargo used in the Naval Office records, with the column for recording 'negroes' positioned in-between 'mules and cattle' and 'pipes of madeira wine'. The mundane administrative status of enslaved humans as cargo is made strikingly clear.

Figure 3: Categories of cargo used in Naval Office Shipping Lists for Jamaica (Source: National Archives 2016).

On leaving Jamaica, The *Norfolk's* new cargo, replacing the human cargo of its previous voyage, is listed as 413 planks of mahogany (a large shipment compared to others), along with sugar and rum. It arrived back into the port of Lancaster on 12th April 1765, eighteen months after it set out. This voyage is just one example, many other slave ships doing triangular voyages also carried mahogany as cargo back to Lancaster and to other trading ports.

Making furniture and money from mahogany in Lancaster

In Lancaster, a town becoming prosperous through a new age of national and international trading relationships, the cabinet makers Gillows were a major customer for mahogany and other forms of timber brought into the port (Bowett, 1998). Gillows were established in 1730 and carried on producing fine furniture and fittings (later as Waring and Gillow) through into the 20th Century (Stuart, 2023). In the 18th Century their reputation for producing high quality mahogany furniture, employing a range of local carpenters and craftsmen, became established amongst elite society and they became a successful and growing cabinet making business and general merchants. Unlike other successful Lancaster families of the time, they had only a limited involvement directly in the slave trade. Robert Gillow was a part owner of a ship *The Gambia* that made two transatlantic slaving trips in 1755 and 1756 but this was not a financially successful or significant investment (Elder and Stuart, 2021). Gillows did, however, indirectly and significantly benefit from the prosperity that the town's involvement in the slave trade was generating.

The Gillow archive (Stuart, 2023) provides an extensive record of the activities of the business, through nearly 200 years of trading, and we can trace what it was selling and to whom in some detail. For example, examining the sales records for 1771-72 ('Waste Book' 344/3) shows a number of Lancaster family names repeatedly figuring - Rawlinson, Hinde, Satterthwaite and Lindow – all who had family members either directly involved in the slave trade, through owning ships, captaining them, and/or acting as merchants, or who owned slaves in colonial plantations (Elder, 2012; Lancaster Black History Group, 2024). They are detailed in the archive entries as regularly buying furniture and other goods and the Rawlinsons were also shipping Gillow furniture to colonial outposts, whilst bringing back mahogany and other goods to sell in Lancaster and Liverpool (Walker, 2021). Gillows itself also organised shipments back

to colonial officials, plantation owners and merchants in the West Indies. For example, a long entry in the sales records, dated 22nd November 1771, covers five pages detailing an extensive cargo for the ship *The Nancy*. The cargo is to be delivered to John Swarbrick, a fellow Lancastrian and one of a number of agents or merchants based in the Caribbean that Gillows worked with. The list of furniture that follows includes chests, chairs, dining tables, wash stands, sideboards and side tables, along with other 'sundry goods' to be packed with the furniture, coming to a total of £267.13s.6d (equivalent to about £46,000 today). This is the biggest single transaction listed in the records during the year. *The Nancy* is just one of 56 ships listed across the archive as transporting goods for Gillows to the West Indies from 1744 to 1796 (Ingram, 1992) emphasising the scale and continuity of what was a lucrative trade in returning mahogany in crafted form back to its origins.

Examining the archive records ('Day Book' 344/21) for the period after *The Norfolk* returned to Lancaster with its cargo of 413 planks of mahogany, shows that Gillows were also selling its many and varied products crafted from mahogany to wealthy customers around Britain. Approximately one hundred and fifty items of mahogany furniture were sold over this period (April to December 1765) ranging from larger articles such as tables and bookcases, to smaller ones such as screens and knife trays. They received orders and commissions throughout the north-west of England, for example, for the wealthy households at Sizergh Castle in Cumbria and at Dunham Massey in Greater Manchester. Their trade also extended more widely, such as the commission of a table for the Blue Bell Inn at Haddington near Edinburgh in Scotland, and a large desk sent to a customer in Salisbury in southern England. The fitting out of various houses and public buildings using mahogany wood are also recorded.

We cannot directly trace the eventual destination of specific cargos of mahogany carried on slave ships such as the Norfolk, and what specifically the timber was crafted into, but we can be clear that all the Caribbean mahogany brought to Lancaster and part of the circulations of wealth in its local economy would have been harvested by enslaved labour. That Lancaster was known for this association between mahogany and slavery is made apparent by Charles Dickens who wrote in a novel based on his travels in North-West England that:

> "*Mr. Goodchild concedes Lancaster to be a pleasant place… a place possessing staid old houses richly fitted with old Honduras mahogany, which has grown so dark with time that it seems to have got something of a retrospective mirror-quality into itself,*

and to show the visitor, in the depth of its grain, through all its polish, the hue of the wretched slaves who groaned long ago under old Lancaster merchants" (Dickens, 1857)

Conclusions and implications

This short account has made clear the extended geographies and lines of connection that were produced by the interlinked trades in enslaved Africans and mahogany wood. These stretched backwards and forwards across the Atlantic, involving the forced transhipment of enslaved Africans who were brutally exploited to produce mahogany timber. That timber was shipped to Britain, crafted into fine furniture, sold and then transported onwards to wealthy customers locally, regionally and internationally – including those making their fortunes in the colonies that the timber first came from. This was an international trading network that incorporated exploitation, violence and immorality and that implicated many places, people, families and institutions within its reach. The specific focus on Lancaster has made also clear that colonialism is not just about what happened in distant territories but also how it shaped the geography of places in Britain - the wealth that was created, the businesses and livelihoods that were transformed and the narratives about places that in time became those of their history and heritage.

As emphasised earlier what is distinctive about mahogany as a slave produced commodity is its endurance and contemporary presence. That lasting material legacy has now begun to demand specific attention. For example, National Trust for Scotland has recently examined how mahogany furniture from the 18th and 19th centuries made by a host of famous cabinet makers is to be found throughout its properties presenting a 'difficult history' to be faced up to (Osborne, 2021). Within various heritage contexts the presentation of mahogany furniture to the public is beginning to include at least a line or two about connections to slavery, including in a refurbished gallery devoted to Gillows at the Judges Lodgings museum in Lancaster (Friends of Lancaster Judges Lodgings, 2024). Various slavery-focused events and school education initiatives in Lancaster have also including mahogany as a theme (LBHG, 2024) and through these brought attention to black voices such as Malika Booker. In a poem commissioned by English Heritage (Matthews, 2022), she writes vividly about experiencing

the materiality of old mahogany doorknobs, banisters and stairs as ‘worship and annihilation all in one’ (Booker, 2020).

These examples provide a start but there is much more that could be done to make explicit that mahogany produced through enslavement is still with us and still accruing value. Maybe the most acute question to be debated is what should be happening within the antiques trade where money is being made from items with their roots (literally and metaphorically) in colonial slave economies. For example, an online search at the time of writing for Gillows furniture from the Georgian and Regency periods reveals a set of six chairs for sale at £50,000, a bookcase for £68,000, a desk for £75,000 and other makers command similar prices. Is it enough for this enduring trade to document the craftsmanship and aesthetics of the item for sale along with the presence of a ‘makers mark’ or some other documented proof of its provenance? Should not the narrative labelling of its history go further to include the conditions of labour and wealth making embedded in the timber from which it is made?

There have long been calls for mahogany logging in the contemporary world to be made illegal as an unsustainable practice that can be a key driver for wider deforestation and for consumers to mobilised against its exploitation (Fearnside, 1997). This had some success in that in 2003, mahogany became listed as an ‘endangered species’ to which tight international trade controls would apply (United Nations Environment Programme, 2003). There is though a longer, and arguably darker historical geography of logging practices and ecological devastation to also problematise and bring to the attention of consumers as part of facing up to the legacies of British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.

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