



# Making New Connections



## The Visitor Centre

### The Lunar Society

The Lunar Society was an informal group of friends who met on the night of the full moon to discuss Science, Industry, opinions and ideas. Some of the members were involved in the campaigns to end the slave trade.

**Thomas Day** was the most vehement opponent. He wrote one of the earliest literary attacks on slavery in 1773; a dramatic and impassioned poem called 'The Dying Negro'. The poem traces a slave's life from his capture to his death in London and was inspired by a true story Day had heard.

**Erasmus Darwin** also wrote of the evils of slavery in his epic poem 'The Botanic Garden'

*"How AFRIC'S coasts they craftier sons invade*

*With murder, rapine, theft – and call it TRADE!"*

He also wrote; *"I have just heard that there are muzzles and gags made at Birmingham for the slaves of our island."* He is clearly horrified. How then was he able to reconcile the commercial interests of some of his fellow Lunar Society members?

**Samuel Galton** was a prominent Quaker and business man, yet his business was the manufacture and sale of guns; an important trade in Birmingham at that time. Guns played a crucial role in the success of the Slave Trade as they were a commodity shipped out from England to West Africa where they were exchanged for slaves. A contemporary source tells us that Galton was able to *"send annually above a hundred and fifty thousand (guns) to the coast of Africa."* The archive containing most of Galton's papers contains a careful estimate attending to the ship 'Perseverance' which travelled *"from Liverpool to Africa thence to the West Indies and from the West Indies to London with a cargo of goods and 527 slaves."*

Although there was active campaigning in Birmingham against slavery, there was also a contingent of manufacturers who petitioned parliament in opposition to the abolitionist argument. For many, commercial success went hand in hand with the trade in slaves.



## Portrait of Olaudah Equiano

Originally from Africa, Equiano had been sold to slave traders as a young boy. Eventually he bought his freedom, settled in England and began campaigning for the abolition of slavery. He wrote a book on the horrors of slavery and began a series of countrywide lectures. On a visit to Birmingham in 1789 he met with some of the town's influential figures including Matthew Boulton, Joseph Priestley and Samuel Galton. In 1793 Equiano wrote:

*"I beg you to suffer me thus publicly to express my grateful acknowledgements for their Favours and for the Fellow-feeling they have discovered for my poor and much oppressed countrymen."*

How would Boulton have legitimized his interest in supplying steam engines to the West Indies with a figure like Equiano?





## Anti Slavery Medal

**Josiah Wedgwood** friend and business rival of Matthew Boulton and member of the Lunar Society was one of a new breed of men who combined commercial success with enlightened thinking.

Wedgwood was a strong supporter of abolitionist opinion and became a committee member of the Society for the Suppression of the Slave Trade in 1787. In the same year he produced a cameo of the image of a kneeling slave in chains with the inscription “*Am I not a man and a brother.*”



This image was adopted by the abolitionists and did much to promote and publicize their cause. Some had the cameo inlaid on snuff boxes. They appeared on bracelets or as hair pins. Wedgwood sent a large quantity to **Benjamin Franklin** in America who wrote back;

*“I am distributing your valuable present of cameos among my friends in whose countenances I have seen such marks of being affected by contemplating the figure of the Suppliant...”*

He felt it would be as effective as the “*best written pamphlet*” in helping their cause.

In 1788 Wedgwood wrote to Watt:

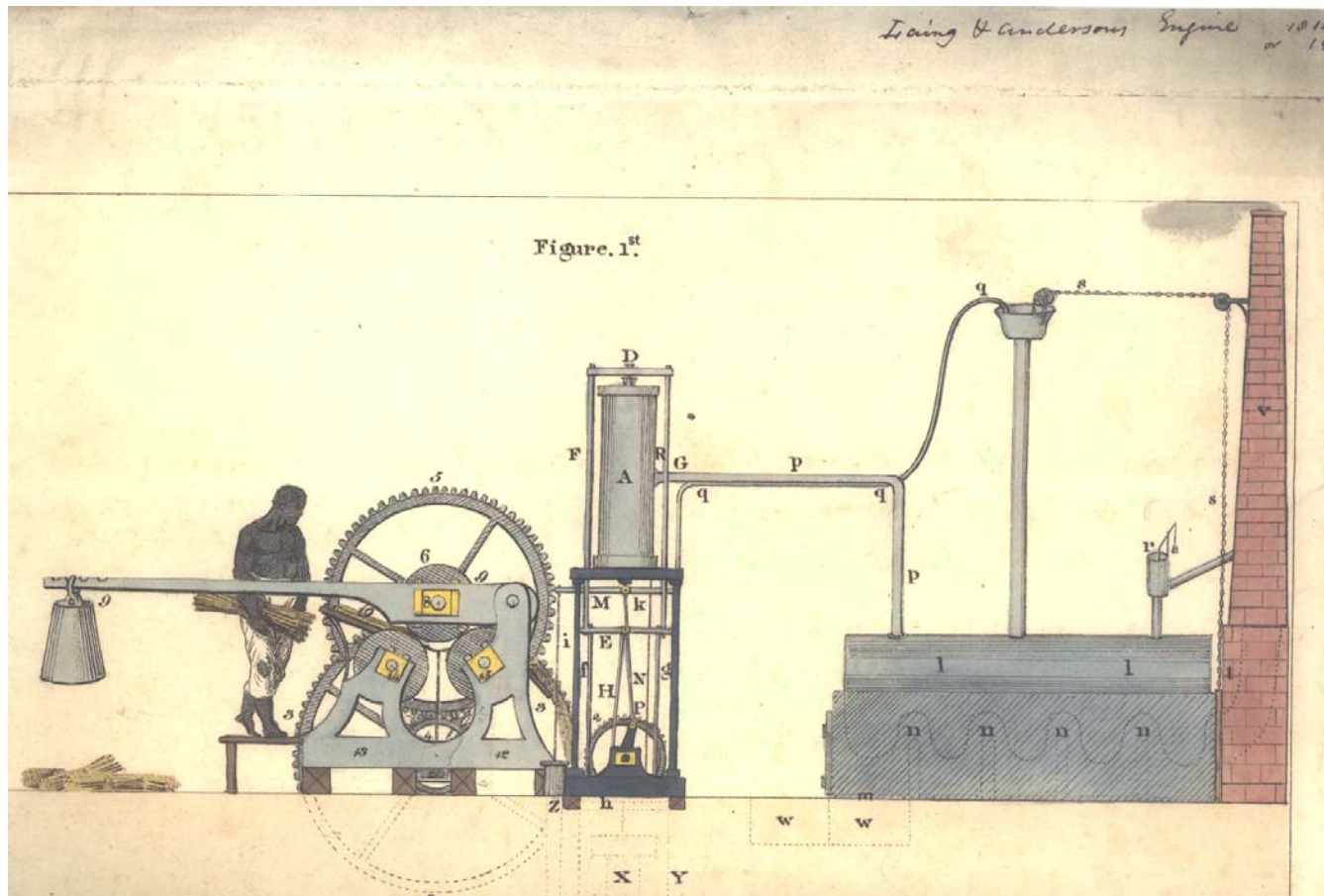
*“I take it for granted that you and I are on the same side of the question respecting the slave trade. I have joined my brethren here in a petition from the pottery for the abolition of it.”*



## The Steam Engine

Matthew Boulton and James Watt are probably most famous for their partnership to develop steam power. They produced steam engines that revolutionized the way factories and mass production worked, thus providing the impetus for the Industrial Revolution. These engines were used to pump water out of mines, work forge hammers and to power corn, cotton and metal rolling machines.

Most pertinently the firm of Boulton & Watt also supplied engines for the sugar mills on the slave driven plantations of the Caribbean. The first steam engine actually shipped to the West Indies was in 1801.



However Boulton & Watt were in negotiation with plantation owners as early as 1783. Boulton writes to Watt in that year;

*"Mr Pennant, who is a very amiable man, with ten or twelve thousand pounds a year, has the largest estate in Jamaica; there was also Mr Gale and Mr Beeston Lang, who have some very*



*large plantations there, who wish to see steam power in lieu of horses.”*

Certainly some of the capital which financed Boulton & Watt in their development of the steam engine came from the West India trade. Watt received advances from Lowe, Vere and Company whose “securities” depended upon the trade. Over one hundred engines were ordered from Boulton & Watt for erection in the Caribbean between 1778 – 1825.

Were they relieved to find such a lucrative market for their business or did they counter it with the belief that the introduction of steam power might ultimately contribute to the abolition of slavery?



## Soho House

In many ways Soho House can be seen as a symbol of the wealth and affluence in England at the end of the Eighteenth Century. Much of the national wealth was based on the trade in slaves. Towns like Liverpool and Bristol were more heavily involved due to their shipping links and they flourished in terms of wealth and status at this time. Today there is a museum called the Georgian House in Bristol which was owned by a local slave trader and Liverpool has its own permanent exhibition to slavery.

*“..... my father had also a very large acquaintance with the affluent West India merchants of Liverpool. They were most kindly, generous and hospitable; their houses were like palaces. I was amazed to see the sumptuous drawing-rooms, rich with satin and silk.... and at the large assemblage of gaily dressed and jewelled visitors....”* (From the Autobiography of **Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck**)

Birmingham's links with slavery however are less evident and to a certain extent have been hidden. There are a few references to the trade in the Boulton & Watt archive in the Central Library, for example there is mention of James Watt's father's involvement in the purchase of slaves in the 1740s.



## Breakfast Room

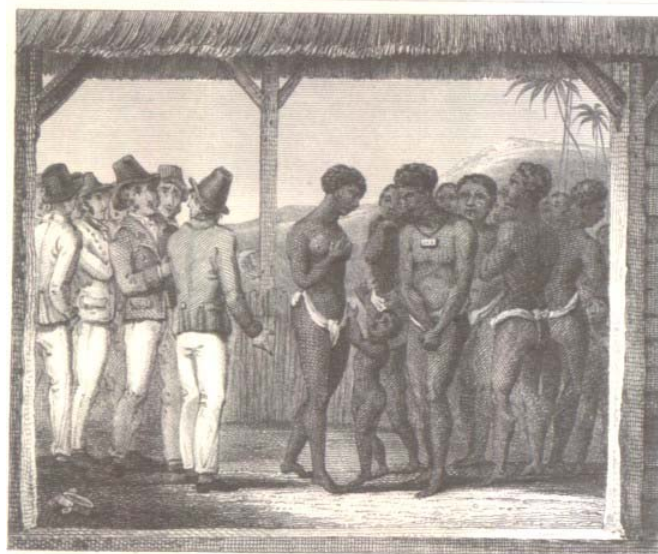
Throughout the Georgian period consumers began to acquire a taste for more exotic goods. Intricate tea ceremonies were the mark of a true lady and the national tooth was becoming sweeter.

This room is set up for breakfast where they might have had sweetened tea or chocolate and freshly baked bread with butter. However, many of the goods finding their way onto the collective table were the product of trade in slaves. Trade in sugar for example increased immensely over this period and in 1775 the British West Indian colonies were producing 10,000 tons of sugar. A boycott of sugar was arranged to show support for the slaves of the sugar plantations. **Mary Ann Schimmelpennick**, granddaughter of Samuel Galton, was supportive of this:

*“About this time I became interested, during my Dudson visits, in an anti-slavery cause. In the evenings we often read pamphlets on the subject, or examined in detail the prints of slave ships and slave treatment.... both my cousins and I resolved to leave off sugar as the only produce of slave labour within our province to discontinue.”*

**Susannah Watts** observed;

*“In the town of Leicester, by the zeal of a very few individuals alone, nearly one fourth of the population, viz. 1500 families have been so impressed by the subject, as to engage themselves to abstain from the use of West-Indian sugar.”*



Slaves exposed for Sale.  
*See Bickell's 'West Indies as they are' page 21 &c*



## Dining Room

This is the room in which the Lunar Society discussed and debated matters over and after dinner on a Sunday or Monday nearest to the full moon. The women would 'withdraw' to the Drawing Room while the men would continue to drink, smoke and entertain each other with ideas and inventions.

Tobacco is another example of a slave cultivated product. It was grown in Virginia where they initially tried to grow sugar. In 1775 220 million pounds of tobacco was exported from Maryland and Virginia. It was widely used in the Coffee Houses where it was smoked in pipes, chewed and ground to dust for Snuff.

**Samuel Galton's son** was asked to defend himself to the Quakers due to the family links with slavery. He argued that he had inherited the business and said:

*"those who use the produce of the labour of slaves, such as Tobacco, Rum, Sugar, Rice, Indigo and Cotton are more intimately and directly the promoters of the slave trade."*

**Joseph Priestley** wrote:

*"In order to raise our sugar, and other West-India commodities, perhaps half a million persons are annually destroyed.... All the European plantations taken together are said to require an annual supply of sixty thousand fresh slaves."*

It is possible to imagine the heated debates that may have raged in this room over the issue of the Slave Trade. In April 1789 **Erasmus Darwin** writes to **Josiah Wedgwood** in horror:

*"I have heard that there are muzzles and gags made at Birmingham for the slaves in our island. If this be true, and such an instrument could be exhibited by a speaker in the House of Commons, it might have great effect."*

Does his shock at this fact indicate how secretive Birmingham's involvement in the Slave Trade was? The context of the quote hints at there being a sense of rumour and hearsay.

Just after the Slave revolt in San Domingo (Haiti) in 1791, James Watt writes to a plantation owner and prospective steam engine buyer:

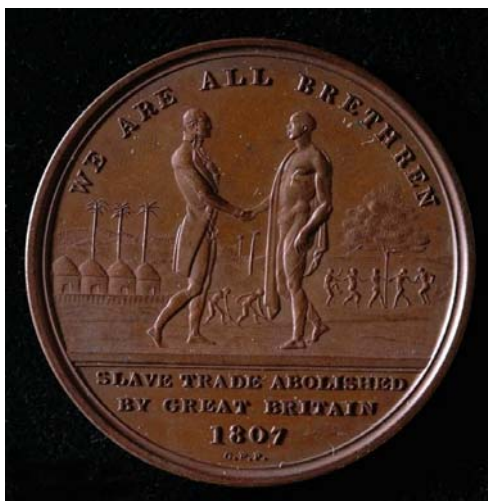
*"We sincerely condole with the unhappy sufferers, though we heartily pray that the system of slavery so disgraceful to humanity were abolished by prudent through progressive measures."*



## Mint Room

Among Boulton's greatest passions was the production of coins and he established the first steam powered mint here at Soho. During the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries coins were produced at Soho for such places as Bombay, Madras, Bengal, Ceylon and Sierra Leone.

The coins produced for Sierra Leone were for the Sierra Leone Company, which had been set up in 1791 by supporters of the anti slavery movement. Their idealistic aim was to acquire land in West Africa and to set up a colony for repatriating freed slaves who had been living destitute in Britain and Nova Scotia. The company issued its own coinage in an effort to establish an economic system and it was these coins that Boulton produced. The design of the coin shows on one side a lion in front of a mountain, to illustrate the colony's name which means Mountain of Lions, and on the other clasped hands, one black and one white, to represent the Company's intention of repatriating freed slaves in dignity and friendship.



Boulton medal 1807



## Miss Boulton's Bedroom

Anne Boulton led a sheltered existence here at Soho House. Most of the letters related to Anne in the archive are to her rather than from her, so how did she feel about the Slave Trade?

We know that Anne's contemporaries were part of the Female Society for the Relief in British Negro Slaves set up in 1825 by **Amelia Moillet**, the daughter of another Lunar Society member **James Keir**. She lived nearby at Hamstead Hall in Handsworth. They raised funds and galvanized support and their aim stated in their first annual report was to:

*“awaken attention, circulate information, and introduce to the notice of the affluent and influential classes...a knowledge of the real state of suffering and humiliation under which British Slaves yet groan.”*