

The Brookes, the Zong & the George Floyd Video

An article for Black History Month 2020 by John Campbell, minister of High Cross URC, Tottenham

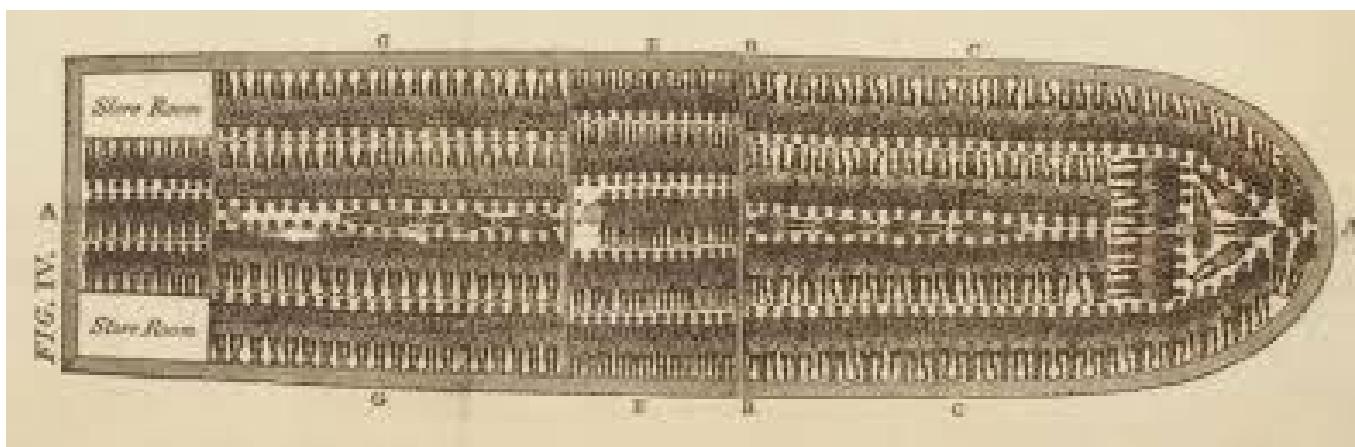
Humans are a strange lot. We can spend generations ignoring truths that are so obvious they shouldn't need even a moment's thought. At the same time, we pass on complex, deceiving webs of untruths, uncritically, from generation to generation, as if they were obviously true. Take slavery and racism. They both fail the simple 'Golden Rule' test of "Would you like someone to do this to you?" Obviously not. Then, it must be wrong to do it to others.

And yet slavery persisted and grew more gruesome and elaborate up until the late eighteenth century, virtually without challenge. And the struggle that started then, the struggle to win white minds for its abolition, was a mighty, long and hugely expensive struggle. Then there's racism. Racism, which was taken to whole new levels of awfulness by that same transatlantic slave-making enterprise, is still entrenched and actively re-inventing itself all across Western societies right up till today. How do you begin to dislodge such nonsense? How do you get people to question the deep unquestioned fakeries they have inherited as 'truth' and expose and eliminate their shocking injustice?

Sometimes, a particular story, or even a particular image, can capture the imagination of those who hitherto resisted or blanked out all previous calls to re-imagine. Let's look, briefly, at three such imagination-catching entities. Two of them come from the late eighteenth century and one from 2020. Somehow, they all seem to have had a disproportionate power to enable re-thinking, to let shafts of light reach the murkiest corners of inherited ways of thought. None of them did the work of changing how our world works, but all of them helped to open some minds to the reality that serious work needed doing and accept that everyone had a part to play in bringing change.

The Diagram of the Brookes

In 1788, as the abolitionist cause took off in the UK, a group of abolitionists in Plymouth commissioned diagrams of the Liverpool Slave ship *Brookes* to illustrate how enslaved Africans were packed below decks on slave ships for the months-long transatlantic voyage. It is a deeply shocking, ugly and dehumanising image. And yet it is a necessary one. If anything, it underestimates how many people a ship like the *Brookes* carried. Thomas Clarkson, in his 1808 history of the abolitionist struggle in which he was a major protagonist himself, says that this "*print seemed to make an instantaneous impression of horror upon all who saw it, and was therefore instrumental, in consequence of the wide circulation given it, in serving the cause of the injured Africans*". It seems to have worked powerfully on minds hitherto closed to the human cost of the slave-produced sugar that was so greatly cherished. It evoked a "no!" from people who had tried hard not to notice. It enabled people to apply the Golden Rule Test, to accept "This can't be right".



The Tragedy of the Zong

Some years before that print of the *Brookes*, in 1781, a tragedy occurred on another slaving ship, the *Zong*, that also caught the imagination of many, not by vivid, ugly illustration but by the ugly

vividness of the story. The *Zong* was a medium-sized slave trading ship operated by Liverpool slave merchants. On its first voyage for them navigational errors meant that it missed Jamaica and had to turn back. Arguing that there was not enough fresh water for all on board, 142 Africans were thrown overboard – jettisoning part of the ‘cargo’ to save the rest of the ‘cargo’ (or so it was argued). Afterwards, the owners claimed insurance on their lost part-cargo and an English lawsuit followed. At the first trial the jury found for the owners, but it was appealed and, following a public outcry and clamour by abolitionists for the crew to be tried for murder, Lord Mansfield found for the insurers. But no murder trial ensued. Yet the ugliness of the story – with a fight in the English courts over drowned black bodies viewed simply as ‘cargo’, not as human beings, had a powerful, shocking effect. And some re-engaged the Golden Rule Test and questioned the whole basis of the slave trade and the way it denied the humanity of Africans, and a door to activism was opened.

The Videoing of George Floyd

Coming now to the strange summer of 2020. We have that video of the relentless killing of George Floyd by a “law enforcement” officer. I did not watch it. I heard of it and found it too ugly, too full of Clarkson’s “horror” to watch. I saw a still of the implacable, defiant look on the face of George Floyd’s murderer – that was more than enough. But, like the *Zong* and the *Brookes*, somehow this killing, enshrined in that video, took on a massive iconic role. There had been way too many other black men killed by police before, not only in the USA. Their deaths were as shocking, but somehow the moment passed and nothing was changed. But here, in 2020, hitherto unengaged imaginations were captured by that video. Unprecedented numbers of white people walked in the many, many ‘Black Lives Matter’ marches and protests, not only in the USA. The need for serious work on how our societies are organised was acknowledged by many who might previously have shrugged it off. The work is still to be done. May enough people, including those whose imagination was stirred by George Floyd’s fate and the video that recorded it, do enough work to change our world. Black Lives have been heinously disrespected and trashed for far too long. In the face of slavery and racism, black history still tells amazing, richly-human stories of black lives – and many more such stories will have been lost or deliberately suppressed. Surely it’s time to fire up everyone’s imagination so we can all claim a better fairer future – a future in which Black Lives Matter, if anything matters at all.

In writing this article my reading included “The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery” by James Walvin, I accessed this British Library website: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/diagram-of-the-brookes-slave-ship> and I benefited from reading many articles over the summer about George Floyd & BLM on The Guardian website.