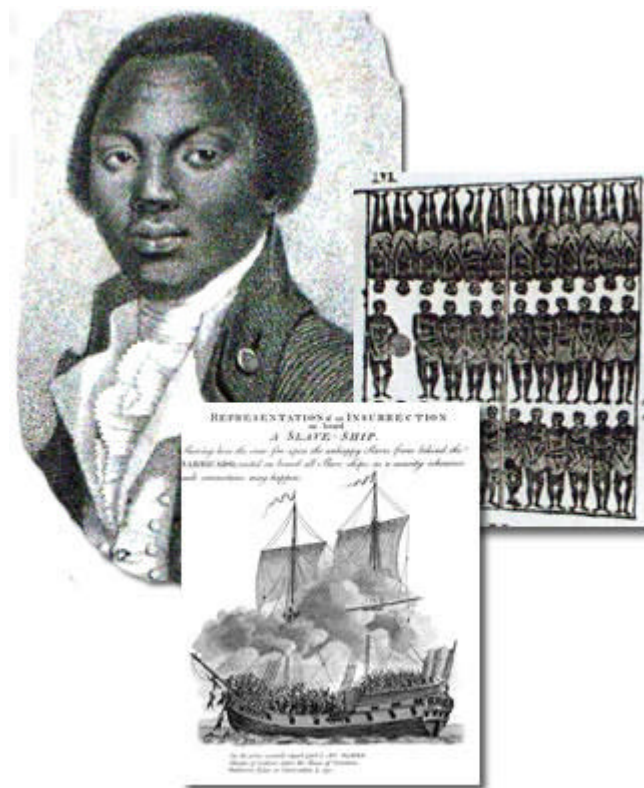
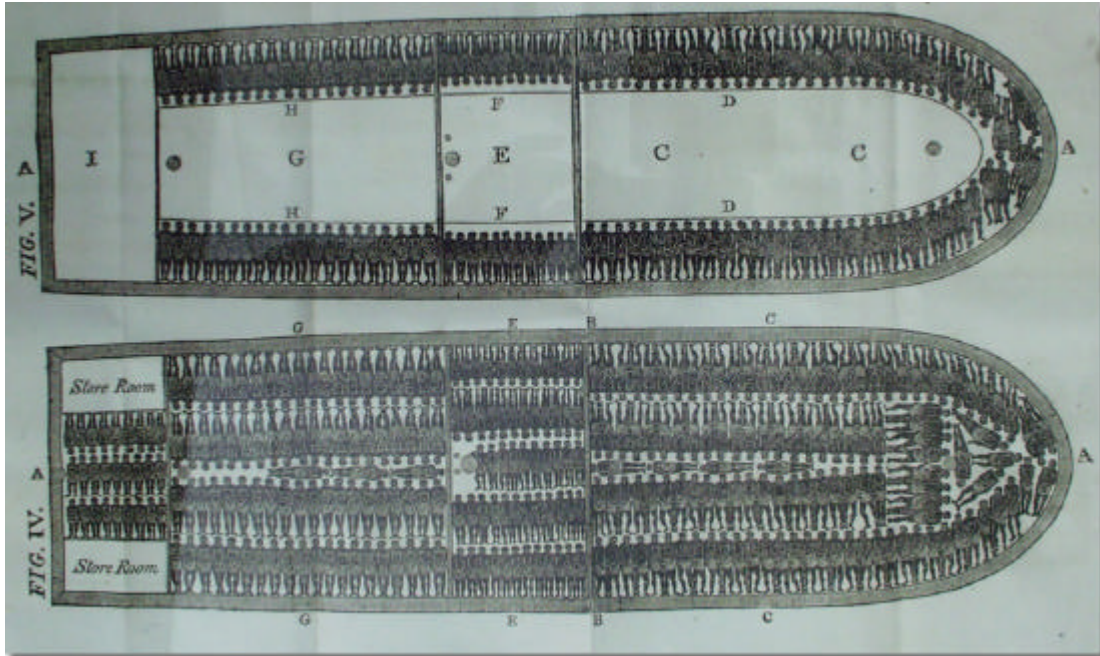


# **‘Agonising and insufferable’: did the Middle Passage deserve its awful reputation?**



Montage of images showing engraving of Olaudah Equiano, close-up of how slaves could be stowed aboard a slave ship and a representation of an insurrection aboard the slave ship Barricado.

**Source 1. Diagram showing how slaves could be accommodated aboard a slave ship and the accompanying explanation.** Taken from Thomas Clarkson, *The history of the rise, progress and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade*, London, 1808.



The committee, having proceeded thus far, thought that they should now allow certain dimensions for every man, woman, and child; and then see, how many persons, upon such dimensions and upon the admeasurements just given, could be stowed in this vessel. They allowed, accordingly, to every man slave six feet by one foot four inches for room, to every woman five feet by one foot four, to every boy five feet by one foot two, and to every girl four feet six by one foot. They then stowed them, and found them as in the annexed plate, that is, they found (deducting the women stowed



in Z of figures 6 and 7, which spaces, being half of the half deck, were allowed by Sir William Dolben's last bill to the seamen) that only four hundred and fifty could be stowed in her; and the reader will find, if he should think it worth while to count the figures in the plate, that, on making the deduction mentioned, they will amount to this number.

The committee then thought it right to inquire how many slaves the act of Sir William Dolben allowed this vessel to carry, and they found the number to be one hundred and fifty-four; that is, they found it allowed her to carry four more than could be put in without trespassing upon the room allotted to the rest; for we see that the bodies of the slaves, except just at the head of the vessel, already touch each other, and that no deduction has been made for tubs or stanchions to support the platforms and decks.

Such was the picture, which the committee were obliged to draw, if they regarded mathematical accuracy, of the room allotted to the slaves in this vessel. By this picture was exhibited the nature of the Elysium,

which Mr. Norris and others had invented for them during their transportation from their own country. By this picture were seen also the advantages of Sir William Dolben's bill; for many, on looking at the plate, considered the regulation itself as perfect barbarism. The advantages however obtained by it were considerable; for the Brookes was now restricted to four hundred and fifty slaves, whereas it was proved that she carried six hundred and nine in a former voyage.



**Source 2. A slave's description of life aboard a slave ship.** Taken from Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa as written by himself*, London, 1789.

Soon after  
this the blacks who brought me on  
board went off, and left me abandoned  
to despair. I now saw myself deprived

of all chance of returning to my native country, or even the least glimpse of hope of gaining the shore, which I now considered as friendly; and I even wished for my former slavery in preference to my present situation, which was filled with horrors of every kind, still heightened by my ignorance of what I was to undergo. I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste any thing. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat,



one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across I think the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced any thing of this kind before; and although, not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it, yet nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings, I would have jumped over the side, but I could not; and, besides, the crew used to watch us very closely who were not chained down to the decks, lest we should leap into the water: and I have seen some of these poor African prisoners most severely cut for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating. This indeed was often the case with myself. In a little time after, amongst the poor chained men, I found some of my own nation, which in a small degree gave ease to my mind. I



inquired of these what was to be done with us; they gave me to understand we were to be carried to these white people's country to work for them. I then was a little revived, and thought, if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate: but still I feared I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shewn towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves. One white man in particular I saw, when we were permitted to be on deck, flogged so unmercifully with a large rope near the foremast, that he died in consequence of it; and they tossed him over the side as they would have done a brute.

**Source 3. Evidence of Mr Falconbridge regarding conditions aboard a slave ship.** Taken from *An Abridgement of the Minutes of Evidence taken before a Committee Considering the Slave Trade*, 1789.

Slaves examined generally by the surgeon. All he has seen appear dejected when brought on board. P Some are so the whole voyage, others till they die. Has known several refuse sustenance with a design to starve themselves; compulsion used in every ship he has been in to induce slaves to take their food. Has known many instances of their refusing to take medicines when sick, because they wish to die. A woman on board the Alexander, was dejected, taken ill of a dysentery, and refused both food and medicine. Being asked by the interpreter what she wanted, she replied, nothing but to die—and she did die. Many other slaves expressed the same.

A great mistake in his evidence before the Privy Council respecting the tonnage of the ship he sail'd in, being there stated twice the real size, were as near as he can guess, from 200 to 250 tons. On



o. second voyage purchased about 300 slaves, and  
II. lost between 30 and 40. In the Alexander, pur-  
— chased 380, lost 105: In last voyage, purchased  
39. about 420, and lost 51 or 52.

When employed in stowing slaves made the most of the room and wedged them in, they had not so much room as a man in his coffin either in length or breadth impossible for them to turn or shift with any degree of ease, had often occasion to go from one side of their rooms to the other always took off his shoes, but could not avoid pinching them; has the marks on his feet where they bit and scratched him. In every voyage when the ship was full they complained of heat and want of air. Confinement in this situation so injurious that has known them go down apparently in good health at night and found dead in the morning: On last voyage opened a stout man who so died, found the contents of the thorax and abdomen healthy; concludes he died for want of fresh air; thinks it possible he might have died of an apoplexy, but thinks that was not the case in this instance. (610)

A place in every ship for sick slaves, no accommodations for them, lie on the bare planks, has 17  
seen frequently the prominent part of the bones of Pal  
the emaciated about shoulder blade and knees,  
bare. If plaister or bandage applied they generally remove them.

Most prevalent disorders in Negro-ships are fevers and dysenteries; consequences of numbers being ill of the latter extremely noxious; cannot conceive any situation so dreadful and disgusting. In the Alexander, deck was covered with blood and mucus, resembled a slaughter-house; the stench and foul air were intolerable, from being down a short time in the Alexander is persuaded a night's confinement in that situation would have destroyed him (630) thinks as the tradesmen stand many of these inconveniencies cannot be prevented. Never could recover a slave from



**Source 4. Evidence of Mr Knox describing conditions on board a slave ship.**

Taken from *An Abridgement of the Minutes of Evidence taken before a Committee considering the Slave Trade*, 1789.

Slaves on board are, most assuredly, treated humanely. Rice is a principal article of their food on the Windward Coast, also cassada, palm-oil, many glutinous herbs, pepper; on the coast often fish. When rice enough cannot be got, ships carry out beans and stock-fish; and from Africa, palm-oil, pepper, sheep, goats, fowls. The beans are generally split, but has seen them otherwise. Never knew slaves on board without plenty of food. It is almost the sole employment of the officers to serve P. them. The natives of Angola live

In most ships you may stand upright under the gratings, in others all over the ship. In very small ships often not above four feet. His ship 5 feet 10 inches, under the gratings 6 feet 10 inches, with platforms all round nearly in the middle between the P. 86. decks, about 2 feet 11 inches from each, quite full of slaves.

Slaves who speak the same language are chained together. Recollects not an instance to the contrary. (see p. 106.)

Never saw it necessary to force the slaves to dance.