

# Teachers' Notes

## *Voices of Resistance: Slavery and Post in the Caribbean*



'Coaling Ship, St. Thomas, V. I.' Postcard, 20<sup>th</sup> Century

### Introduction to *Voices of Resistance*

*Voices of Resistance: Slavery and Post in the Caribbean* explores the global role of British postal operations and the post as a tool of empire. The exhibition exposes how 19<sup>th</sup> century British postal ships carried mail between Britain and the Caribbean, enabling enslavers to manage plantations. Postal ships were refuelled by enslaved coal workers, mostly women, on the island of St. Thomas. This exploitation began after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. In a day coal workers carried up to 800 tonnes of coal, about the weight of five hundred cars.

The exhibition tells the powerful stories of enslaved women, men and children in the Caribbean. It highlights their many acts of resistance and the fight for freedom from exploitation. The Postal Museum has partnered with African, Caribbean and Black diaspora culture bearers and community groups in London and the United States Virgin Islands to understand and accurately share their stories. We aim to honour the lives and experiences of enslaved people, recognising their hopes, strength, and determination to fight for their rights.

### Visiting *Voices of Resistance* with your class

*Voices of Resistance* can enrich your teaching of the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans. The exhibition is most suitable for KS2 students and older.

It is located at the end of the exhibition galleries and has a different look and feel to the wider museum to reflect the sensitive nature of the topic. We recommend you make a planning visit to prepare for your class visit and brief all supporting adults about the content. If you would prefer not to include it in your visit, you can exit the galleries bypassing the exhibition.

### What is on display in the exhibition?

Objects on display reveal how British people benefitted from slavery. Letters sent from Jamaica to Britain describe life on the plantations and by reading them 'against the grain' we can use them to learn the stories of enslaved people and their acts of resistance.

Images have been carefully selected with captions that sensitively tell the important story of the horrific conditions faced by enslaved people. Objects and films have been selected and made with communities that share uplifting stories to celebrate and honour the legacies of coal workers and enslaved people.



Houghton Court Plantation, Jamaica, 1820-1821  
by James Hakewill

## Exhibition highlights

- Postcards, paintings, clothing and letters from the museum's archives sent between plantation owners in Britain and managers in the Caribbean.
- Films honouring the lives and legacies of enslaved and low-paid coal workers on the island of St. Thomas.
- The story of the historic 1892 Coal Workers' Strike led by Queen Coziah, a bamboula dancer, which led to better pay.
- The story of Mary Prince, the first known Black woman to publish an autobiography in Britain. Her 1831 account helped change public opinions of slavery in Britain.
- A display of baskets, inspired by those carried by the coal workers on St. Thomas, made by the Caribbean Social Forum.
- Written documents by James MacQueen, pro-slavery campaigner and Royal Mail Steam Packet Company founder, whose aim was to maintain power across the British Empire.

## Reading history 'Against the grain'

Letters in the exhibition were written by plantation owners and managers and leave out the experiences and memories of enslaved people. However, by reading the letters 'against the grain' they can offer a way of understanding the lives of enslaved people.

Reading 'against the grain' means using critical thinking to question or challenge the meaning of a text. Our researchers looked carefully at the letters to try and put enslaved people at the centre of the story. To do this we asked enquiry questions, for example:

1. **Who wrote the letter and what was their job?**
2. **Why was the letter written and who was it for?**
3. **What can the letter tell us about the bias of the writer?**
4. **Who or what has been left out of the letter?**
5. **What else was happening in history at the time?**

By re-examining the words of plantation managers, we were able to reveal the hidden voices and experiences of enslaved people and their acts of resistance.

**Find out more about slavery and post in the Caribbean:**

[The coal workers of St Thomas](#)

[The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company](#)  
[Plantation letters](#)