

Media release
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Manchester
Lit & Phil



The Manchester Lit & Phil publishes findings on its earliest members’ links to historical slave trade

**The Manchester Lit and Phil welcomes report by UCLan researchers on its
transatlantic slave trade connections**

The second oldest learned society in the world – based in Manchester and formally known as the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society - has welcomed the final report from researchers at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) who have been exploring its historical links with the transatlantic slave trade.

The [Manchester Lit & Phil](#), which was established in 1781, has a long history of advancing education and knowledge in literature, science, arts and public affairs.

Partly prompted by the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 and the worldwide debates that followed, the Society commissioned UCLan Professor Alan Rice and his team (Andrea Sillis, Drahoslava Machova and Kirsty Roberts) at the university's internationally renowned Institute for Black Atlantic Research (IBAR) to explore what links its earliest members may have had with the transatlantic slave trade and the significance of those links in the context of Manchester's wider economic, industrial and cultural standing at the time.

Between 10 and 12 million enslaved Africans were transported across the Atlantic Ocean from the 16th to the 19th century as part of the so-called triangular trade route that brought cotton, coffee and sugar to Europe.

The researchers investigated a variety of documentary evidence between 1780 and 1865, such as public records and what remains of the Lit & Phil's own archives, in order to discover who benefitted from the slave trade, including links with cotton plantations in the United States and the Caribbean, as well as notable abolitionist members who stood against the slave trade.

Key findings

A significant number of early Lit & Phil members profited to varying degrees from links to the slave-based economies of the Black Atlantic. These members contributed to the transatlantic slave trade by stimulating demand for slave-produced cotton as enormous wealth flowed into Manchester through the scaled-up industrial capacity of its mills. They range from engineers such as James Watt and Joseph Whitworth, to mill owners such as Robert Owen, James McConnel and Samuel Greg, to slave-produced goods traders John Birley and Sir George Philips. Some were more directly involved in financing slavery and owning slaves, such as Benjamin Heywood, who invested in slave voyages, and George Hibbert, a plantation owner and anti-abolition campaigner. In detailing how these individuals and their families and networks were connected to the transatlantic slave trade, this report addresses a longstanding gap in the information available on Lit & Phil members' positions with respect to slavery during the late 18th and 19th centuries.

Ian Cameron, President of the Manchester Lit & Phil, said:

“We now have the study report before us and can look forward to better understanding our shared history as we explore ways to develop an appropriate and effective response to calls for a reevaluation of national attitudes towards history and race.

“This report is a major achievement, and I must take this opportunity to thank the UCLan team for their work. Although this is just the first phase of a bigger programme of research (which will include a study of our abolitionist members), we are publishing this report straight away to invite an early response from both our members and the wider public. Based on all the advice received so far, we now plan to reach out to Manchester’s diverse and underprivileged communities to develop mutually beneficial relationships and collaborations. We will build on our history of discussion, mutual learning and social interaction to open new opportunities to further engage with the past and, looking forward, to promote inclusivity, equality and respect for diversity within society at large. There are exciting and demanding times ahead for the Lit & Phil and this report represents an important step on that journey.”

Professor Rice, the project leader and co-director of IBAR, commented:

“The publication of this report is evidence of the Lit & Phil’s willingness to enter into further dialogue about increasing diversity and inclusion within its own membership and to engage more actively with contemporary demands for acknowledgement of the historical links to transatlantic slavery within a community that is still marked by racial prejudice and inequality.”

The findings of the project have now been published on the Manchester Lit & Phil website (manlitphil.ac.uk) and various follow-up events are planned, including a public panel discussion in late September. Further details will be published as soon as available.

ENDS

Notes to editors

Photo caption - John Raphael Smith (1752-1812), *The Slave Trade*. Courtesy the Whitworth, The University of Manchester

The Manchester Lit & Phil has been broadening minds since 1781. Their creatively curated programme of lectures gets under the skin of today's most pressing issues and stimulating subject matter. Hand-picked, charismatic speakers shed new light on what we're all talking about and thinking about today — from arts and culture, to politics and philosophy, to science and technology.

The University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) is an international, multi-campus University tracing its roots back to 1828 and leading the way in modern learning today.

We started life in the city of Preston, and are spending £200 million on giving our Preston Campus a world-class makeover. This includes our new £35 million Engineering Innovation Centre, and our stunning new Student Centre, which provides second-to-none care for our students. Both buildings overlook University Square, a focal point for community events and an iconic gateway linking together the city and the University.

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