

REMEMBERING THE sold and the strong

VISITING THE INTERNATIONAL SLAVERY MUSEUM ON OPENING DAY

It is 23 August 2007, Slavery Remembrance Day and a big day for the city of Liverpool, UK, as the International Slavery Museum (ISM) is officially opened. The ISM, housed on the third floor of the Merseyside Maritime Museum in Albert Dock, is the latest addition to Liverpool's growing stock of good museums.

Not since the heady days of Beatlemania has the city attracted such worldwide attention. It causes a stir because the museum, like the various Holocaust museums, is as much a commemoration of inhumanity as it is a historical repository. Although its theme has the potential to be depressing, the place presents a history where the victims and their descendants refuse to be vanquished, instead rising in spirit and achievement to leave an indelible mark on the modern world.

Notable descendants of Caribbean slaves are present, including musician and social activist Harry Belafonte, and, later, the Reverend Jesse Jackson. Entry is free, but such is the initial interest that people are booked in for entry at one-hour intervals. So there is time to have a coffee or snack at one of the waterside cafes or wander a little further afield



Two women visit the International Slavery Museum on opening day.



Museum goes on opening day.



The shrouded form of racism – a Ku Klux Klan uniform.

to Liverpool's Pier Head with its grand edifices to former prosperity – a good proportion of which came from the slave trade itself. Much of the Pier Head itself is currently a construction site as the impressive new Museum of Liverpool takes shape. Due for completion later this year, but not due to open until 2010, it will enhance Liverpool's famous waterfront skyline.

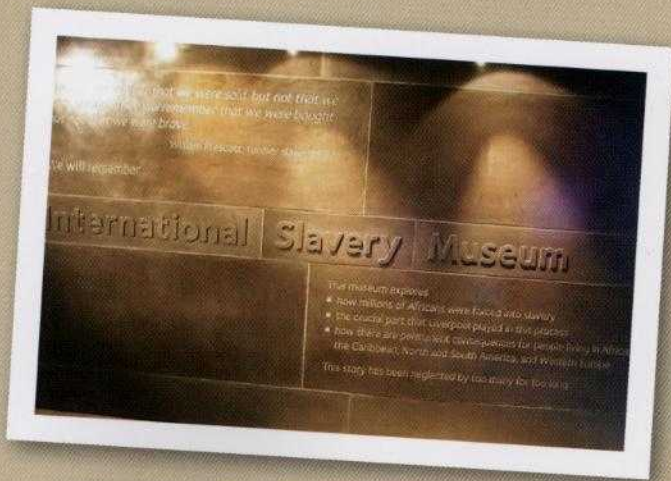
People-watching around the Albert Dock area on this day, though, seems the most rewarding way of passing a little time. And the folk to watch are the throngs of black visitors, many dressed traditionally and colourfully. Some have come from overseas but many are from parts of Britain itself.

'This is our history', a young British black woman observes. 'At last', her partner adds.

They are right – in part. For the ISM, while chronicling black repression associated with historical and contemporary legacies of slavery, subsequent survival and achievement inevitably presents aspects of white European and American racial hegemony. It's as much about white history, albeit shameful. The presentations inexorably link black fate with white mercantile activity, even as those elements change with the late twentieth-century prominence of blacks in areas of pop culture, sport and politics (amongst others).

Liverpool has the dubious appropriateness (I avoid using the word 'honour') to be the home of the ISM, as the city was the principal port from which the slave trading ships left. It is the museum's strength that, in its exploration of why and how millions of Africans were forced into slavery, it does not spare the host city from scrutiny of its role in the process. Liverpoolian families made rich by the trade are listed in the special Liverpool section. It is not quite 'outing' but not far from it.

Street name signs, some related to such families, are displayed as a reminder. It was sobering to find Penny Lane (of the Beatles song fame) among them, named after slave-trader James Penny. From 1740 Liverpool merchants



Opening panel of International Slavery Museum.

dominated the slave trade, along with those of London and Bristol. Between 1700 and 1807 more than 5000 voyages originating in the port took some 1,500,000 Africans to slavery. Money was raised to buy slaves in Africa from the sale of the cargoes of cloth, gin, machinery and guns carried in Liverpool ships. The human cargo, tightly packed, was taken to the Caribbean and the Americas for sale.

Artefacts of the slave trade – heavy shackles, slave ship inventories, sketches showing how slaves were packed as cargo, depictions of plantation life – chilling in their raw state but subtly lit, emphasise in simple visual statement the inhumanity of the trade and the plantation slavery system. Moot quotations abound. Witness the words of a sixteenth-century Spanish conquistador: ‘Africans are ideal people to work here, in contrast to the natives who are so feeble.’

The museum’s head, Dr. Richard Benjamin, is on record as being ambitious to expand the museum’s connections globally. He told the Press at the opening that new partnerships with museums in Africa and the Caribbean are currently being created. Whilst it is important to convey the brutality of the slave trade, Dr. Benjamin states that it is also important ‘to represent the positive legacy ancestors have had in countries like the USA and Britain’. One aim of the museum, he says, is to ‘fight racism and challenge stereotypical views’.

The sections, planned as a creative time-line, constantly reinforce the African roots of the slaves and their descendants. From the outset you encounter Africa’s long and complex cultural history, complete with a life-size Nigerian Igbo compound re-creation and beautiful and decorative arts and crafts. The message here is that those sold into slavery were uprooted from a culture that was far from unsophisticated. It is a sudden shock then to encounter the Middle Passage section with its harrowing audiovisual and documentary representations of enslavement, the brutal slave-ship voyages, harsh treatment in their destination, the Americas, and then the huge enduring impact on the victims’ descendants.

The Legacy section is vitally engaging as the story of modern black America and Britain unfolds. Here is the story of civil rights movements, the African diaspora, West Indian and African immigration to Britain, the story of the blues, jazz and rap. The artefacts of racism are present, including an original and somewhat disturbing Klu Klux Klan robe from the 1920s, amongst other items. The end note, though, is pride, as latter and present-day black heroes are celebrated on the Black Achievers’ Wall – the people who have led the way in ‘setting the truth free’, in the museum’s catchphrase. Examples of the seventy-five or more heroes are Paul Robeson, boxing champ Mohammed Ali, Oprah Winfrey and Kofi Annan. The promotional brochures and posters underscore the message as they state the words of a former

slave, William Prescott from 1937: ‘Remember Not that We Were Sold ... But that we were STRONG’.

Interactivity abounds – touchscreens; hands-on this and that; a wall on which you can scribble reactions, observations and a pithy phrase; black artists in MTV-type videoclips and multiscreen and surround sound video art encounters with the slavery story.

There is subtlety, too. At one spot you find yourself looking through a narrow window at the Pier Head, nowadays dominated by the familiar Cunard and Liver Buildings. A label informs you that from this window you are looking at the very place from where the slave-ships once departed for Africa.

For me the museum comes together with its largely untold, gently weeping stories of the long and winding road. It motivates me to scribble a note for the suggestion box on leaving. Whilst staring at the faces of famous black British sportspeople an observation had sprung to mind. I had earlier that week watched a game of Premier League soccer. Of the twenty-two players on the field sixteen of them were black, ten of them in one of the teams. My suggestion is that the museum adds a current photograph of that team to the achievers’ collection: after all, the museum’s story is as much about the present and the future as the past.

General Information: Together with the Merseyside Maritime Museum and the Customs and Excise Museum, the International Slavery Museum is situated at the Albert Dock in Liverpool. It is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and entry is free. Useful websites: www.internationalslaverymuseum.org.uk www.merseysidemaritimemuseum.org.uk

Harvey Broadbent is Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Modern History at Macquarie University.



Wall of Achievement.



FRIENDS

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Friends of the National Museum
of Australia Inc.

GPO Box 1662 Canberra ACT 2601

Telephone 02 62085048

Fax 02 62085398

Email friends@nma.gov.au

Office hours: 9.00am-5.00pm,
Monday-Friday

Patrons Lady Valery Stephen,
Jack Thompson AM

Member of the Australian Federation
of Friends of Museums

Editor Roslyn Russell

Design MA@D Communication

Printing Goanna Print

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- 3 From the President
- 4 From the Director
- 5 Ernabella tour
- 6 Acquisitions: Joan Richmond
Ambrose Kyte
- 10 Gallery Development
- 11 Friends Foundation and Centre for Historical Research
- 12 Conservation: The 1923 5CV Citroën
- 14 Curator in the Field: Longford
- 16 Public Programs: Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton
- 18 Publications: *Making Tracks*
- 20 Public Programs: Storytelling
- 22 Acquisitions: *Squatter*
- 23 Children's Medical Research Institute
- 24 Exhibitions: *League of Legends*
- 28 Education
- 32 Snapshots
- 33 Friends calendar
- 35 Membership
- 37 Australian Archipelago
- 38 Foreign Correspondent:
Museums in Ireland
International Slavery Museum, Liverpool
- 42 Visitors
- 43 Sponsor profile: Prime
- 44 From the Nationals
- 46 In the Shop