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**PENISTONE
CLOTH**

TEXTILES & SLAVERY

**FROM THE PENNINES TO
BARBADOS AND BEYOND**



This booklet accompanies The Penistone Cloth exhibition, 29th September to 29th October 2023, Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery.

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British Textile Biennial and Global Threads,
September 2023

BRITISH
TEXTILE
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Booklet Design

Made by Mason

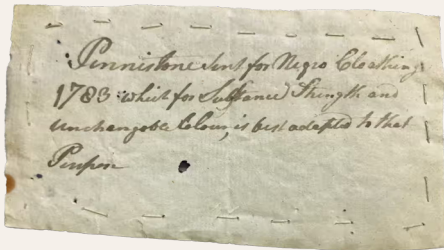
Warning

The language in this booklet is drawn from original documents and is repeated only where strictly necessary for sharing historical documents and accounts – not least written on the object itself.



THE PENISTONE CLOTH

At first look it seems quite insignificant. A small, crumbly piece of ancient blue cloth. However, this tiny, extraordinary fragment contains threads that stretch across the globe and weaves legacies that we continue to trace and unpick to this day.



Lying hidden among old letters and accounts for over 200 years, its story was recently uncovered through the discovery of its original 18th century label, which reads:

***“Penistone sent for negro clothing
1783 which for substance
strength and unchangeable colour,
is best adapted to that purpose.”***

We now know that this was supplied to a slave-owner in England as a sample for 410 yards of material he subsequently purchased. Uniquely, we know exactly who this clothed: the community of enslaved African people held at Turner’s Hall, Saint Andrew Parish, Barbados.

Penistone was a type of rough, cheap woollen cloth dyed with indigo, particularly associated with West Yorkshire. This small sample is believed to be the only surviving example of British-made “slave cloth” - a physical link between the millions of enslaved people in the Americas who were clothed in similar wools, linens, and cottons and thousands of workers in Lancashire and Yorkshire whose livelihoods relied on producing these fabrics.

Drawn from this unique object, the timeline and light installation in this exhibition reflect the worldwide connections of the Lancashire textile industry - the manufacturing hub connecting the profits of the enslavers, colonisers, and industrialists with the experiences of local textile workers, African captives whose lives were exchanged for British-made goods, Indigenous Americans massacred and marched from their homes to make way for cotton plantations, and South Asian spinners and weavers forced into poverty by colonial laws.



Administration for Negro Clothing
1783 (which for Substance) Strength and
unchangeable Colour, is best adapted to that

Purpo

1698



END OF ROYAL AFRICAN COMPANY MONOPOLY

The trafficking of captive Africans was opened to private business, providing new markets for British manufacturers and profits to invest in industrial development.

Throughout the entire transatlantic slave trade, the Royal African Company transported more captive Africans to the Americas than any other institution. Growing conflict, combined with the English domination of West African markets, led to enslaved Africans replacing gold as the primary export. The final six years of the 17th century were marked by the Komenda Wars, a series of battles won by the English and their African allies. The opening up of the trade allowed slave raids by African trading partners to proliferate. The number of captives shipped by Britain trebled following the 1698 Act.

1700 & 1721

CALICO ACTS



The British government created tariffs limiting cloth imports from South Asia to secure home and West African markets for British industry.

Named after Calicut (Kerala) in Southwest India calico is the name given to untreated fabric made from cotton fibres. The fabric was often used for clothing or household items. Its popularity increased hugely in Britain and West Africa after the East India Company began importing large quantities. The Calico Acts of 1700 and 1721 were passed as a way for Britain to protect its cloth producers from cheaper, better quality Asian competition. The introduction of the Acts transformed Lancashire and Yorkshire into leading hubs of global textile manufacturing, giving them preference in colonial markets and creating incentives for technological innovations.

1735



SOUTH CAROLINA NEGRO ACT

British authorities created racist laws removing rights of free and enslaved black people, including rules forcing them to wear cheap, coarse clothing.

This Act was one of many from across the British colonies which served to control enslaved people and further strip their humanity by depriving them of adequate clothing. It forced them to wear cheap, low-quality cloth, much of which was imported from England and Wales. The fabric wore hard against skin due its tough and unforgiving texture. Despite this, it was used to make a variety of garments such as trousers and skirts. After abolition, those later freed from the shackles of slavery described the fabric as “needles sticking one all the time.”

1757

BATTLE OF PALASHI



The East India Company took political control in Bengal, as South Asia went from the world's largest manufacturing centre to become a market for British goods.

The Battle of Palashi occurred in north-eastern India on 23 June 1757 between British and Indian soldiers of the East India Company and the forces of Siraj-ud-Daulah and his French allies. £250 million of wealth looted after Palashi brought vast fortunes and investment back to Britain but victory also marked a turning point for the Company – going from traders to rulers. In 1765 they gained 'diwani' - the right to tax the people of Bengal. In time, these powers suppressed local textile production in favour of Lancashire imports, preventing many workers from sustaining a living for themselves and their family.

1768



PENISTONE CLOTH HALL OPENED

Driven by colonial demand, traditional cottage industries became more important and greater control and profits came into the hands of wealthy merchants.

The northern textile industries trace their origins back centuries, where spinning and weaving were done at home at night and during the winter to provide extra income. As global markets grew, more landless rural people were drawn into the “putting out” system, becoming reliant on income from wool manufacturing. By 1770 wool was the largest industrial sector in Britain, with power increasingly in the hands of merchants, who built trading halls in towns like Wakefield, Leeds, Penistone, and Halifax. More people became dependent upon textile production for income. British woollen cloth production grew by 800% between 1700 and 1800.

1768 & 1779

LANCASHIRE ANTI- MECHANISATION RIOTS



New technologies and the first factories in Britain transformed workers' lives, leading to violent resistance against innovators and businessmen.

Growing demand and profits from colonial markets spurred technological advances. New production lines required fewer people, reducing pay, and forcing home worker into factories. In an early outbreak of anti-mechanization action, James Hargeaves's house and Spinning Jennies were destroyed in 1768 by rioters in Blackburn. The same year, Richard Arkwright began developing his first cotton spinning mill, becoming known as "the father of the modern industrial factory system". The 1770s was a time of civil, social and political unrest globally, spreading to Lancashire in October 1779 as carding engines were smashed in Blackburn and Arkwright's Chorley mill was burned down.

1783

THE PENISTONE CLOTH



The Penistone Cloth was made in northern England as a sample for 410 yards of material sent to clothe the community of enslaved people held at Turner's Hall estate, Barbados.

This cloth style was named for the West Yorkshire town of Penistone where local sheep breeds produced coarse but hard-wearing wool. This object is the only known surviving example of the British-made textiles that clothed millions of enslaved people across North America and the Caribbean, bringing huge wealth to Lancashire, Yorkshire, and Derbyshire. The Fitzherbert family owned Turner's Hall, a sugar plantation in Barbados. The records where this object was found show that large quantities of Penistone were sent to this estate and also reveal the names of the 140 people they enslaved who were forced to wear this material.

1791-1804

THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION



Enslaved people fought for 13 years to create their own independent state, inspiring freedom fighters and terrifying enslavers across the Americas.

Haiti was colonised by France as a plantation economy based on enslaved African labour, producing an abundance of sugar and coffee. Initially led by Toussaint Louverture, the Haitian Revolution was a long and difficult struggle to freedom. The Revolution had a huge impact on the Caribbean and the United States - as exports were cut-off, enslavers elsewhere were spurred to seek new cotton and coffee frontiers to meet global demand. From being such a rich and productive colony, in freedom Haiti was impoverished by being forced to pay France reparations of around \$30 billion dollars in today's money.

1803



THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE & THE COTTON KINGDOM

Colonial expansion into the Mississippi Basin provided land for a cotton empire enslaving millions and exporting much of its produce to Lancashire.

The 1793 invention of the cotton gin, mechanising the cleaning of cotton, fuelled transformation on both sides of the Atlantic. By 1800, cotton had overtaken wool as Britain's largest textile industry. In 1803 the United States almost doubled in size when it "purchased" the right to the Louisiana Territory from France. This land was rich in valuable resources. It was also the ancestral home to many thousands of Indigenous Americans. The subsequent spread of plantation slavery across the continent allowed the U.S. to dominate the world market. By 1860, raw cotton accounted for 61% of total U.S. exports.

1807



ABOLITION OF THE BRITISH SLAVE TRADE

Following decades of campaigning across Britain, over 250 years of slave trading came to an end. Slavery continued in the British Empire for 30 more years.

The British abolition movement elicited solidarity and collaboration across diverse sections of society; this included many of Lancashire's mill workers, who contributed to petitions, meetings and boycotts of slave-grown goods. In 1807, the government finally banned the trade in human beings. Britain had played a central role in transatlantic slavery, transporting a total of 3.1 million African people to the Americas, 400,000 of whom did not survive the journey. While this campaign was successful, emancipation did not arrive in the British Empire until 1838. Despite abolition, Britain and Lancashire's reliance on slave-grown cotton from the United States continued to grow.

1816

BUSSA'S REBELLION

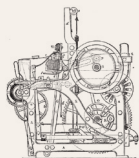


The largest slave revolt in the history of Barbados was the first of three major rebellions in the British Empire which hastened calls for abolition.

The largest major slave revolt to take place in Barbados took place over 3 days in April 1816. The rebellion was named for an enslaved driver named Bussa who organised it with a group of male and female enslaved leaders. Planned in response to the brutal conditions of life on Barbadian plantations, the rebels hit back at enslavers by burning cane fields and destroying property. 50 freedom fighters died in battle and 70 were executed in the field by the time British authorities regained control. Whilst it was ultimately unsuccessful, the revolt created grave doubts about whether slavery could persist.

1826

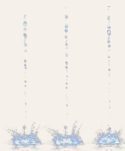
POWER LOOM RIOTS



A Luddite revolt broke out in Lancashire as weavers pay and freedom was threatened by mechanization, paving the way for future workers' organising.

The Power Loom Riots protested against the hardship caused by the introduction of weaving machinery, with large support from local citizens. Rioting began on 24 April and continued for three days. 21 mills were attacked and 1,000 power looms were destroyed. Rioters marched from Accrington to Blackburn before a crowd of 3,000 were attacked by the military at Chatterton, with six shot dead. Once the riots were over 20 leaders were arrested. A few local manufacturers tried to introduce a minimum wage, but were not supported by government. Despite failure, the actions paved the way for future unionisation of workers.

1831-39



THE TRAIL OF TEARS

100,000 Indigenous Americans were violently forced from their homes to make way for cotton plantations that supplied the growing Lancashire cotton industry.

By the 1850s, 75% of Lancashire's cotton imports were supplied by plantations in the United States. This expansion had been made possible through the ethnic cleansing and forced displacement of five Indigenous nations from south-eastern states by the United States government. The Trail of Tears refers to the state-sanctioned removal of around 100,000 Indigenous Americans from their ancestral homelands, with an estimated 15,000 deaths occurring along the 5,000 mile journey. Although removals took place throughout the 1830s, the term is sometimes applied specifically to the 1838-9 displacement of the Cherokee which resulted in the deaths of a quarter of the population.

1838

EMANCIPATION IN THE BRITISH EMPIRE



British slavery was finally abolished to great celebration after four years of forced “apprenticeship”- but freedpeople received neither land nor compensation.

After decades of abolitionists rallying support in parliament and through wider protest, the Abolition Act of 1833 replaced slavery with enforced “apprenticeship”. In 1838, full emancipation was finally granted to over 800,000 people in the British Empire. Despite freedom, those that were formerly enslaved were not entitled to compensation, back-pay, or land. Instead, enslavers kept the land and were compensated £20 million for their loss of human property. The UK finished paying these debts in 2015. A recent report by the University of West Indies calculated that Britain may owe £18.8 trillion in reparations for the economic impacts of slavery.

1857–59



SOUTH ASIAN REBELLIONS

Rebellions broke out across northern and central India against the East India Company - leading to direct rule by Britain and concessions towards greater autonomy.

The Indian Rebellion took place across North and Central India and Bengal during 1857–58 against the rule of the British East India Company which exercised political and sovereign power over much of South Asia. These revolts were a retaliation against the harsh land taxes and reforms imposed on millions and the alienation of local elites from decision-making. The eventual outcome of these rebellions was that the Company was dismantled and replaced with the British Raj. A Proclamation of Governance was issued that generations of independence campaigners would force into reality and allowed industrial development to be fostered.

1862



THE LANCASHIRE COTTON FAMINE

Unemployment and poverty swept Lancashire as Civil War in America led to the cutting-off of slave-grown cotton supplies that regional industry relied upon.

The American Civil War had a devastating impact on Lancashire's textile workers, whose industry depended on slave-grown cotton. When the northern states blockaded southern ports in their battle against slavery, raw cotton exports to Lancashire dried up. Tens of thousands lost work in Blackburn alone. Plunged into poverty and hunger, workers felt abandoned by the government and wealthy mill owners; disorder and riots broke out across the region. Despite their dire situation, many textiles workers viewed this as an ongoing global struggle against related forms of labour exploitation, continuing to stand in solidarity with enslaved people.

1865



EMANCIPATION IN THE UNITED STATES

As the Blackburn Cotton Exchange opened its doors, Lancashire was no longer dependent on slave-grown cotton from the United States.

Following the victory of the northern states, June 19th 1865 finally marked an end to slavery in the United States. War and Emancipation also permanently shifted global textile markets. Opening two months earlier, Blackburn Cotton Exchange would barely be used for the trade it was built for.

For the four million formerly enslaved, freedom brought new struggles. Many were forced into an exploitative system of tenant farming known as sharecropping which allowed the U.S. to retain its status as the world's leading cotton producer. African Americans were widely discriminated against through new "Jim Crow" laws, which enforced racial segregation.

FIND OUT MORE



Global Threads

Additional information exploring many of the themes from this exhibition can be found on the Global Threads website: www.globalthreadsmcr.org/penistone

Historical research for this exhibition was conducted by Global Threads - a public history collaboration between the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery at University College London, the Science and Industry Museum in Manchester, and a diverse team of talented researchers. They aim to create new networks and conversations about Manchester and Lancashire's textiles heritage, drawing out new and previously underrepresented stories, particularly around colonialism, enslavement, and global movements of people and goods.



Haptic & Hue

The Penistone Cloth is discussed in Episode 39 of Haptic & Hue: "A Sliver of Deep Blue Cloth: Unravelling the Textiles of Enslavement", presented by Jo Andrews: <https://hapticandhue.com/episode-39-sliver-of-deep-blue-cloth/>

This exhibition is part of the 2023 British Textile Biennial.

About the British Textile Biennial:

The industrial revolution transformed rural East Lancashire into an engine of fast fashion at the epicentre of a web that stretched across the globe; commandeering human and environmental resources across continents in a vicious cycle of labour, manufacture and trade that persists today and which we now know is unsustainable.

The third edition of British Textile Biennial 2023 (BTB23) traces the routes of fibres and fabrics across continents and centuries to and from the north of England in a series of commissions and exhibitions throughout October in the spaces left behind by the Lancashire textile industry. From the so-called 'slave cloth', spun and woven by hand on the Pennine moors, to the bales of used fast fashion that make their way from British high streets to the markets and toxic mountains of waste in West Africa, BTB23 follows that journey.

BTB23 29 September – 29 October.

<https://britishtextilebiennial.co.uk/>



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