



Between 1766–91, the British West Indies produced over one million tons of sugar.

Sugar nippers were a tool used for cutting off small pieces of sugar. Affluent people in Britain used the larger, plain nippers in kitchens and the smaller, decorated nippers at the tea table.

Before the Victorian inventors created ready-to-use granulated sugar, grocer shops would sell sugar in hard, cone-shaped sugar loaves. Households would then buy these whole sugar loaves or a lump of broken sugar by weight. This sugar would then have to be crushed by sugar breakers and nippers in the kitchen and at the dining tables.

In 1746, the British economist Malachy Postlethwayt wrote, 'If we have no Negroes, we can have no sugar, tobacco, rum etc. Consequently, the public revenue arising from the importation of plantation produce will be wiped out. And hundreds of thousands of Britons making goods for the triangular trade will lose their jobs and go a begging'.

The right to buy and sell human beings went largely unchallenged in Britain until the late 18th century. Between an estimated 12.5 million people were transported from Africa to the Americas and the Caribbean to be enslaved. Over one million African people died in transit. Those who survived faced the brutal conditions of the plantations.

On average, a plantation would own at least 100 enslaved humans to grow and process sugar cane. The turnaround time in acquiring more enslaved labourers was quick. In the conditions typical of sugar plantations, an enslaved human would last a maximum of 19 years. Sugar production required – and killed – hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans.

Sugar growing was labour-intensive, requiring many enslaved humans to make it profitable. The planters worked enslaved people to death and then bought more. During 1748 and 1788, more than 1,200 ships brought more than 335,000 enslaved Africans to Jamaica–Britain's largest sugar-producing colony. Even though the plantations had enslaved African adults and their enslaved children already in Jamaica before 1748, the 1788 Jamaican census recorded only 226,432 enslaved men, women, and children alive on the island – demonstrating starkly the death rate amongst enslaved people. The transatlantic trade treated African enslaved people as objects and goods – a means to expand their sugar trade.

Scotland was complicit in this trade. There were over 46,000 slave owners in the UK. Individuals ranged from those at the heart of government to middle-class tradesmen in the Orkney Islands. However, unlike Liverpool, Bristol or London, Scotland – particularly Glasgow – has little public acknowledgement of the buildings funded by the slave trade. Buchanan Street, Glassford Street and Ingram Street are named after notorious enslavers, but there is no mention of this in the city's history. Just monuments erected to celebrate these individuals.

The 16th–19th-century sugar industry treated people as machinery – a direct outcome of the desire for affordable sugar and a higher profit margin. Over a million humans lost their lives to work on these British-owned plantations.

Today, in the 21st century, some countries still bear the British colonial legacy of 1800. For example, the tea plantation system, devised by the British in Sri Lanka, was run with an indentured workforce, uprooted from India's Tamil Nadu to what was then Ceylon in 1800. They were disenfranchised, without nationality, until 2003. Many died never having had a country to call their own.

Scotland's links to Sri Lanka go back at least 200 years. James Taylor, a Scotsman, travelled to Ceylon when he was only 16 years old. He revolutionized the drinking habits of the world and put Ceylon on the map as a tea producing country. It was only in 2003 that this population of about 840,000 people gained Sri Lankan citizenship. However, malnutrition and poverty still remain a problem for women and children in some tea plantations of Sri Lanka.

To provide context, a cup of Ceylon tea costs around £2.50–3.00. This is around the same as a tea plantation worker's daily wage in Sri Lanka.

The historical and current costs of a cup of tea - with sugar, requires careful reflection.



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