Olaudah Equiano, a slave in Camden
by Gene Adams

Olaudah Equiano (1745 - 97), also known as Gustavus Vassa, lived at different times in various parts of what is now Westminster, and for a while in Holborn and Fitzrovia at addresses in present-day Camden. He first came to England in 1757 as a child, and he died in London in 1797, though much of his life was spent overseas, as a slave in the West Indies or as a sailor aboard various English ships. By 1766 he had purchased his freedom, but he had certainly been a slave in every legal sense of the word, and all that should shock us; it was, after all, only 240 years ago.

Slavery in Georgian Britain
The idea that there might have been 'slaves' in the area of London known today as Camden brings one up short. At that time, however, there were many black slaves in London, perhaps as many as 10,000, though possibly many fewer. Other concentrations of black population were in Liverpool and Bristol, both centres of the notorious transatlantic Slave Trade, in which Africans were transported from the West Coast of Africa to sugar plantations in the Caribbean. The slave ships were operated by European traders, many under the direction of chartered companies such as the Royal Africa Company, founded as early as 1672.

The total black population in the whole of 18th-century Britain is impossible to know. In 1772, just before his famous judgement in favour of the runaway slave James Somersett, Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice, stated that it might affect "14,000 or 15,000 men".1 This estimate presumably related to slave ownership in Great Britain as a whole during the latter third of the 18th century, not only in London, and it would have represented less that 0.2% of the total population at that time.

How could this nevertheless enormous ownership of black slaves be reconciled with enlightened 18th-century England, a country well advanced in scientific discovery and leading the technological developments of the early Industrial Revolution, and with a legal system that had left feudalism and its dependence on serfdom well behind? A famous commentator on the law, Sir William Blackstone, the first Vinerian Professor of Law at Oxford, wrote in 1765 that "the spirit of liberty is so deeply implanted in our [British] constitution and rooted even in our very soil that a slave or negro the very moment he stands in England falls under the protection of the laws and with regard to all natural rights becomes eo instante a freeman".2

Certainly, by 1700 there were no white slaves in England. There were no laws either allowing or prohibiting slavery: they would have been unnecessary, a pointless anachronism. Into that loophole came the evil commercial practice of trading in slaves abroad and of importing black servants enslaved and purchased under the barbarous foreign practices permitted in the Colonies and in America, and tolerated here, with characteristic English fudge and muddle, as respect for other people's 'property'.

Lord Mansfield's judgement
Lord Mansfield was no revolutionary. By 1772 he had been the Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench for 32 years, with a fine intellect, and deeply conservative. He was aware that the slave trade was exceedingly profitable to the country as a whole and was wary of interfering in a thriving economy. However, because of his enlightened personal views as well as his legal expertise, he found himself in a pivotal position, and eventually set in train events that resulted in the ending of not just the evil Slave Trade, but ultimately of Slavery itself. A black slave, James Somersett, had been brought to England from America and had escaped. He had then in 1769 been imprisoned on a slave ship before being sent to the West Indies. Abolitionists including Granville Sharp (1735-1813) served an order of habeas corpus on the ship's captain and eventually, on 22 June 1773, the case came to court before Lord Mansfield. He set Somersett free, saying that:

"...The slave departed and refused to serve: whereupon he was kept to be sold abroad. So high an act of dominion must be recognised by the law of the country where it is used. The power of the master over his slaves has been extremely different in different countries. The state of slavery is of such a nature, that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political, but only by positive law, which preserves its force long after the reasons, occasions and time itself from whence it was created, is erased from memory. It is so odious, that nothing can be suffered to support it, but positive law. Whatever inconvenience, there-fore, may follow from this decision I cannot say this case is allowed or approved by the law of England; and therefore, the black must be discharged."

The result of this decision was that some 15,000 slaves were discharged, their owners concluding that the game was up. It was assumed that "slavery was an institution not recognised by English law and that the rights of a slave owner over his slave could not be exercised in England".3 The actual legal ending of the Slave Trade came about only in 1807, to be followed in 1834 by the abolition of slavery within the British Empire. (In America abolition came some 30 years later in 1865, and then only after a Civil War in which the question of slavery played a major part although it was not initially the cause of the conflict.)

Equiano’s childhood abduction
Equiano’s autobiography — The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself — was published in 1789. In it Equiano (Fig 1), an African by birth, describes his idyllic early childhood in an Ibo village in what we call Nigeria. A favourite older sister looked after him while...
their parents were away cultivating the fields with other adults of the village. One day both children were abducted by neighbouring African slave dealers and sold to another village. They never saw or heard from their family again. (The modern reader must imagine a time and a place where there are no means of communication, and being kidnapped to a neighbouring village, even if it was only 10 miles away from home, would be as bad as being taken 50 miles or more if you had no way of finding out where you were, and no way of sending a distress call to your own people.) Olaudah describes honestly the system of indigenous African domestic slavery under which he was first abducted (aged 8 or 9 maybe). Although it was a distressing experience for the two young children, he makes it clear that they did not suffer abuse or ill treatment at the hands of subsequent African slave owners. These were often essentially domestic situations in which young slaves served merely as companions to the master’s children. He differentiates them firmly from their hideous, brutalising later experiences as captives aboard ships of those days carrying “gew-gaws and presents after drink.” Later in his Narrative he comments on methods of enticing presumably naive victims by giving “gew-gaws and presents after the same manner that East India soldiers are procured in Britain [sic]”.

Such realities are being newly recognised by some African museums in their interpretation of the transatlantic Slave Trade. In Ghana, for example, the display at Cape Coast Castle acknowledges that slavery was not a new phenomenon for Africa and that forms of slavery had existed in the former Gold Coast region since the earliest trans-Saharan trade caravans. The Ghanaians are now keen that this more rounded story of the slave trade be told in their country.6

Kindness and betrayal

When Equiano first came to London in 1757 he was aged, he thought, about 12. He was the property of an English sea captain who gave him as a present to his cousins the Misses Guerin, two pious and kindly young ladies living in London. Captain Pascal had paid about £30 to purchase the boy in the West Indies, rescuing him incidentally from the notoriously brutal Plantations there. Equiano then spent his formative years in England as servant to Miss Elizabeth and Miss Mary Guerin, who befriended him throughout his life, encouraging his education, and his baptism in 1759 at St. Margaret’s Westminster, by which time he was probably aged about 13. In the baptismal record he is described as aged 12 and “born in Carolina”, something which in the light of his own very detailed and convincing description of his African childhood, seems very unlikely. (One has to remember that he had no record of the date or place of his birth and there are inevitably discrepancies in such an account.) Between years in domestic service, he intermittently joined the crews of Captain Pascal’s ships and so became an experienced trained sailor by his early twenties.

All ships of those days carried a number of young boys aged from 13 upwards, training for Naval service as Midshipmen. Young Equiano worked alongside them, grew up and made friends with them, grew up and made friends and generally enjoyed the life. He was clearly a very intelligent young man, still unable to speak English, Equiano had achieved his freedom — paid for with money he had made in legitimate trading allowed by a beneficent Quaker ‘owner’, Robert King, and another English seaman, Captain Thomas Farmer — is as moving as the description of his previous betrayal by Pascal. The fact that he remained friendly with King and Farmer, and even subsequently worked with them, indicates not only the finer personal qualities of both ‘owner’ and ‘slave’, but also the fact that Equiano, like everybody in those days, accepted that some form of slavery in society was inevitable. What they would all have questioned was the shocking brutality of traders and of some owners, rather than the existence of slavery itself. In his first plantation experience as a little African child, still unable to speak English, Equiano had recalled with horror that he had seen “a black woman slave….and the poor creature was cruelly secured; she had one particular lock of her hair, which locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak; and could not eat or drink.” Later in his Narrative he comments again on such disgusting practices, and others besides, 2. Plan of a slave ship, and the Wedgwood medallion; from a 1788 leaflet of the Plymouth Committee of Abolitionists (Bristol Museum postcard, by permission of Bristol Record Office)
saying that it was “very common particularly in St. Kitt’s, for the slaves to be branded with the initial letters of their master’s name and on the most trilling occasions they were loaded with chains, and often other instruments of torture. The iron muzzle, thumb-screws etc...”.

Equiano was still working in various parts of the West Indies and the nearby coast of America. During this time he encountered all the people with the greatest physical violence and disallowing of a black person’s word against that of a white in a court of law. He also suffered a number of violent physical attacks: his status as a freed slave actually attracted attacks rather than protected him from them.

Equiano describes how, on a trading voyage to Philadelphia in (he says) 1766, he witnessed the famous English preacher Rev. George Whitefield (1714-1770) in a crowded American church, some of whose congregation was stationed on ladders at windows outside, as the building was full: “I saw this pious man exhorting the people with the greatest fervour and earnestness, and sweating as much as ever I did while in slavery on Montserrat beach. I was very much struck and impressed with this; I thought it strange I had never seen divines exert themselves in this manner before, and was no longer at a loss to account for the thin congregations they preached to.” Although Equiano may have been mistaken about the year, it is clear from his description that he saw and heard the remarkable Rev. Whitefield in the flesh and became attracted to his burgeoning form of Evangelical Christianity, with its rousing emphasis on compassion and charity towards the less fortunate.

Spiritual transformation

It was a decade when he was wrestling with his own personal identity, trying to establish himself as a full member of his adopted country, Britain, yet unable to give up connections with the West Indies or his deeply ingrained memories of his remote African childhood. His gradual resolution of this problem was later helped by a firm religious commitment to Methodist Christianity, at that time still under the wing of the Church of England. Equiano’s experience of personal spiritual transformation and establishment of himself as a Briton, although hugely complicated by his being black, was not unique in the vast British Empire where the problem of identity, cultural and racial, or between the colony and the mother country, was familiar to millions of Britons, white as well as black, and to their descendants who have learned to accept a hybridised origin from which to construct a stable self-identity.

In 1767, although a free man, Equiano was still working in various parts of the West Indies and the nearby coast of America. During this time he encountered all the racial prejudice for which the Deep South was so long notorious including discrimination against mixed marriages and disallowing of a black person’s word against that of a white in a court of law. He also suffered a number of violent physical attacks: his status as a freed slave actually attracted attacks rather than protected him from them.

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Baldwin’s Gardens, Holborn

Most of Equiano’s times in London, which was most of his life when not on board ship, were spent in north London. The story of Equiano’s connection with Camden (as we understand it now) is fragmentary, and difficult to follow, not least because he seems to have flitted around so many different London lodgings.

We do know, however, that Equiano lived from 1787 to 1788 at No.53 Baldwin’s Gardens, Holborn, using that address in letters to the press published at that time. Baldwin’s Gardens lies two blocks north of Holborn’s main thoroughfare, then lined by bustling coaching inns, and off Leather Lane, whose colourful street market still flourishes today. Baldwin’s Gardens had been a most unsavoury place in the 17th century, with a vague right of sanctuary from the law for criminals and debtors; the composer Henry Purcell once took refuge there from his creditors. The street had improved by 1720, when Strype described it as “...a most unsavoury place in the north side, where there is a handsome open square but not yet finished”, shown as Baldwin’s Square on Rocque’s map of 1746 (Fig 3). The street later deteriorated again, becoming once more a haunt of criminals. The entire area was more or less flattened during World War II, and the site of No.53 is now covered by the precincts of St Alban’s C of E Primary School (1955).

Letters published by Equiano in newspapers of 1788, sometimes
signed with other campaigners such as Cugoana (see earlier), showed that he had an astute understanding of what we would call ‘pressure group’ tactics. For example, on 25 June 1788 he writes to the Public Advertiser in answer to a notorious pro-slaver called Julius Tobin, pulling no punches and leaving aside the polite conventions adopted in his own memoirs. He accuses Tobin of “glaring untruths”, especially in asserting that the word of a free black counted equally in court with that of a white man in the West Indies; and he goes on to say, “you oblige me to use ill manners, you lie faster than Old Nick can hear them. A few shall stare you in the face: What is your speaking of the laws in favour of Negroes? Your description of the iron muzzle? That you never saw the infliction of severe punishment, implying thereby that there is none? That a Negro has every inducement to wish for a numerous family? That in England there are no black labourers?” and so on.

Olaudah signs himself as “Gustavus Vassa, the Ethiopian and the King’s Late Commissary for the African Settlement/ Baldwins’ Garden Jan. 1788.”

‘Gustavus Vassa’

Equiano referred to himself in his writings by his own African name, as he recalled it, spelling it phonetically; Paul Edwards has identified his remembered name with words in the Ibo language today. But he used Gustavus Vassa, his legal European name, in public statements when his status mattered, for example in his published writings, in his marriage and in his will.

It was Captain Pascal who, in about 1759, had given him his ‘legal’ identity, Gustavus Vassa – borrowed from a liberal 15th-century Swedish king of that name. The boy Equiano understandably resisted being renamed, and would no doubt have done so even if had known the noble liberal associations of his new name. It was not uncommon for naval officers to carry their own slaves to sea, or evidently to bring them home and give them as presents to friends or relations. But “naval opinion in general and the Admiralty’s in particular inclined to regard a man-of-war as a little piece of British territory in which slavery was improper” 10 Professor Carretta thinks that the bizarre practice of renaming was used by Pascal to disguise Equiano’s state as slave and chattel of the Captain.

A ‘token black’

The “African Settlement” in Equiano’s title was to be in Sierra Leone, on the west coast of Africa some 1,000 miles west of Nigeria, Equiano’s birthplace. In Sierra Leone some well-meaning but naive campaigners, including the normally wiser Gravirle Sharp, hoped with government support they could establish a new colony of “returned” black slaves, many of them veterans of the American War of Independence in which they had fought with the English against the Americans. Equiano was already known for his activities in organising the Black Poor in London, within which organisation many prospective new settlers were expected to be found. Equiano became effectively, in 1786, England’s first black civil servant. The appointment he accepted turned out to be a sham; he was ousted from it by participants in the scheme after complaining to the Authorities that they were cheating the proposed settlers by providing short supplies. Equiano was no doubt humiliated and angry to find not only that the scheme was a sham but that his word, even as ‘Commissary’, in a supposedly important senior post, counted for nothing; he was, in other words, a ‘token black’. His angry letters of 1788 were published before his autobiography, serving not only to advertise himself in advance as an author but also indicating that he had already been skill as a writer. His talent for expressing himself by the pen has led some – inevitably – to wonder if the autobiography was genuine, or whether it was really written by a well-known author, such as Daniel Defoe, in disguise. Some also try to claim Equiano as an American by birth. But I think that anyone who has experienced something of Africa and who has read his Narrative, especially as annotated by Paul Edwards, can only conclude that it is a true story told by a naturally talented African writer.

Tottenham Street, Fitzrovia

It may have been in Baldwin’s Gardens that Equiano started to write his famous autobiography, The Interesting Narrative. But by 25 June 1788 he had moved to Tottenham Street in what we now call Fitzrovia (Fig 4), an area divided then between the parishes of St Pancras and St Marylebone, and correspondingly today between the boroughs of Camden and Westminster. Why did he move? Maybe picturesque Baldwin’s Gardens was just a little too run down and unsafe; certainly, the quite newly built suburb we call Fitzrovia was nearer to the emerging fashionable West End, with brand new gentry estates being built close by. One supposes it was smarter and healthier to live there, as well as offering more congenial neighbours. Fitzrovia was a place where artists and poets with taste and ambition but without much money could find agreeable places to live at not much cost. Open country was nearby, and, only in 1790 did Robert Adams Fitzroy Square materialise as the area’s magnificent centrepiece.

The Committee for the Relief of the London Black Poor (founded in 1786) was based in adjacent Warren Street. Also nearby, on the site of today’s American Church in London, was the Tottenham Court Chapel, popularly known as Whitefield’s Tabernacle and founded in 1756 by George Whitefield, by whom Equiano had been inspired in America. Whether this proximity was by choice or accident one cannot know. During 1773 or 1774 Equiano had become a committed “Calvinist-Methodist Calvinists at the New Way Chapel in Westminster, and it seems likely that he would have sometimes also attended the ‘Tabernacle’ Chapel in subsequent years. Certainly, his commitment towards his chosen form of Christianity was the mainstay of his later life and an enormous support in his continued fight against slavery.

Equiano first stayed at 13 Tottenham Street, in the Camden sector of Fitzrovia. While living here in the second half of 1788, he was still single and he possibly rented only a part of No. 13. That particular house has since been replaced by one of a later date, but adjacent Goodge Place survives, a small residential terraced street with characteristic brick houses (c.1750) of ‘3 storeys and a basement below’ and with modest little fan-lights. Most of Goodge Place, named Cumberland Street in Equiano’s day, has been restored and painted, recreating the atmosphere of the new Georgian estates. On its corner with Tottenham Street, in a onetime corner shop next door to No.13, is the Fitzrovia Neighbourhood Centre. On its Goodge Place facade, Equiano’s memory is honoured by his inclusion, with other local notables, in a bright memorial mural (Fig 5) painted in 2000 by Brian Barnes for the Fitzroy Play Association.

Riding House Street

By 7 February 1789 Equiano had moved westward, across the parish boundary into St Marylebone (now Westminster) and to 10 Union Street, which later became 73 Riding House Street. Here The Interesting Narrative was presum-ably completed and published. The book in nine volumes was registered with the Stationer’s Company to protect the author’s copyright on 24 March 1789.

Equiano’s house has been demolished and University College London’s Department of Physics & Astronomy and Medical School
Institute of Surgical Studies now occupy the site. The building bears a green plaque, erected by Westminster Council in 2001 and inscribed:

OLAUDAH EQUINO
(1745-1797)
“THE AFRICAN”
LIVED AND PUBLISHED HERE IN 1789
HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY ON SUFFERING THE BARBARITY OF SLAVERY WHICH PAVED THE WAY TO ITS ABOLITION

Many of the surrounding buildings belong to the Middlesex Hospital, the earliest version of which was already flourishing there in Equiano’s day.

Touring and campaigning

Olaudah’s remaining years were dedicated to marketing his book, which, being a canny businessman, he did very expertly, travelling all over Great Britain, promoting its sale, while simultaneously campaigning for the abolition of the slave trade. He was probably also recruiting new members for a left-wing political group called the London Corresponding Society, founded by Thomas Hardy (a friend of Thomas Paine, author of *The Rights of Man*), in whose Covent Garden house Equiano sometimes lodged. Hardy (1752-1832) was later arrested and deported to Australia, while his society was disbanded by the authorities in the nervousness caused by the French Revolution and the violence in Paris.

Equiano was by now a committed Anti Slave Trade campaigner and the purpose of his book was as much to further this new campaign as to record his own remarkable life. The Atlantic Slave Trade is quite rightly described today as the most disgusting mixture of commerce and abuse of a whole race that has been associated with the West within the last few hundred years. But it is important to note that in his later life, Equiano was campaigning – along with, by then, many famous and dedicated white and black intellectuals in London and clergy such as John Wesley – against the Slave Trade. They were not, to begin with at least, proposing the total abolition of the state of slavery.

**Equiano’s subscribers**

Equiano’s autobiography was published in 1789 by subscription, and the list of subscribers makes fascinating reading. It includes famous anti-slavery campaigners from the professions and nobility, mixed with worthy but less notable people. John Wesley the preacher is there, as is the Prince of Wales, together with other well-wishers of all kinds. The 311 names in the first edition had increased to 894 by the final (9th) edition in 1794. The first list includes a Mrs Guerin, related to Olaudah’s early employers and protectors, Elizabeth and Mary. Also listed is Mrs Baynes, as Miss Mary Guerin had become on marrying a surgeon-general to the garrison in Gibraltar, in 1774. There are several Naval Officers, some of whom might have known Equiano in his early sailing days.

Another subscriber is Josiah Wedgwood, the famous artist-potter, who in 1791 produced an exquisite little anti-slave-trade medallion (see Fig 2, p 9). This was struck to promote the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and thousands of copies were sold. It is appropriate that the medallion, showing a chained black slave with the words “Am I not a man and a brother?”, is displayed (in 2004) in the British Museum’s Enlightenment exhibition, in George III’s recently refurbished grand library. It was George III who had ordered in 1788 an investigation into the slave trade by the Privy Council Committee for Trade and Plantations. By then approximately 80,000 Africans a year were being transported to the Americas, more than half of them in British ships. In 1792 an Abolition Bill was passed in the Commons, only to be defeated in the Lords.

Also in the book’s subscription list is Granville Sharp, the distinguished anti-slaver, already a friend and supporter of Equiano, and a visitor to his deathbed during his last illness in 1797. Equiano had known him personally since at least 1783, when he had told Sharp about the notorious drowning of 133 slaves thrown overboard, from a ship called the Zong, in order to make a false insurance claim. The first list of subscribers further includes a Rev. Mr C I La Trobe, undoubtedly a member of the distinguished La Trobe family who were associated with the Moravian Church in London, and black Christians in London, such as Equiano.

A family man

Equiano lived in Fitzrovia for only three years, and by 1790 had moved south again. The 3rd and 4th editions of his very successful autobiography seem to indicate that by then he was living at 4 Taylor’s Gardens, Chandos Street, Covent Garden. Olaudah was now not only campaigning and promoting his book, but also soon to start a family. In 1792 he married an Englishwoman, Susanna Cullen from Soham (Cambridgeshire), and they had two daughters – Ann Mary (or Maria), born 16 October 1793, and Joanna, born 11 April 1795. Ann Mary only lived for three years, until July 1797. Her mother Susanna predeceased her, dying in 1796 (possibly at the Chandos Street address). So too did her father, who died on 31 March 1797. The tragic sudden demise of three of the family suggests some kind of infectious disease, as would not have been unusual in those days. It was a sad ending to a very short family life.

**Equiano’s will**

The younger daughter, Joanna, survived and was well provided for. Her father left her £950 to be paid in 1816 when she turned 21, a sum “roughly equivalent to £80,000 today”. Such
prosperity entitled Equiano to call himself a gentleman in his will. Furthermore, Equiano was wealthy enough to require a will, and he was one of very few Afro-Britons in the 18th century in this position.” By the time he wrote it, on 28 May 1796, Equiano was living at the Plaisterer’s Hall, Adde Street in the City.

Equiano left money to the London Missionary Society, with which the Rev. La Trobe was connected and whose directors were then based at the Spa Fields Chapel, in Clerkenwell. The bequest was to assist the school established in Sierra Leone, which, owing to the collapse of his earlier job as ‘Commissary’, Olaudah never did visit.

Most interestingly, he also left a legacy to James Parkinson, the owner of a small collection of natural history specimens collected by Sir Ashton Lever and known as the Leverian Museum, that the British Museum later declined to buy, and which was dispersed by auction. It would be fascinating to know how Equiano came to be connected.

Another anuity was left to Francis Folkes and his wife Frances, of Pleasant Passage near Mother Redcap’s Inn, Hampstead Road (on the site of the present World’s End pub in Camden Town). Pleasant Passage, then on the rural fringe of London, is now, as Underhill Passage, a not especially pleasant alleyway next to Marks & Spencer. The yearly value of the annuity was £58 2s 8d, not a fortune, but a generous gift, presumably to two good friends. Perhaps they had cared for Equiano or his family in their times of need.

Where did Olaudah’s wealth come from? Some of it derived from his own hard work as an independent trader; a little of it maybe from gifts; but undoubtedly most of it from his own shrewd marketing of his spellbinding autobiography.

Other black intellectuals

Equiano was not the only black intellectual in London during the late 18th century. Others were active in helping the less fortunate black people, through the organisation for the Relief of the London Black Poor. A fellow black intellectual, Ignatius Sancho,1 wrote letters describing the frightening Gordon Riots against the Catholics in London. Lord Mansfield, suspected by the rioters of having pro-Catholic sentiments, was a target. On June 9th 1780, Sancho wrote: “The Fleet Prison … Clerkenwell and Tothill Fields [prisons] together with Newgate partly burned, and 300 felons from thence let loose upon the world — Lord M’s [Mansfield’s] house in town [Bloomsbury Square] suffered martyrdom; and his sweet box at Caen Wood [Kenwood] escaped almost miraculously, for the mob had just arrived, and were beginning with — when a strong detachment from the guards and light horse came most critically to its rescue — the library [in Bloomsbury] and what is of more consequence, papers and deeds of vast value, were all cruelly consumed in the flames.”

Black slaves portrayed

A few notable blacks of the time were female. Dido, a young Mulatto (mixed-race) girl was related to no less than Lord Mansfield, and lived in his household at Kenwood. Born c.1763, she would have been a child when her great-uncle pronounced his judgement on the slave Somerset. In the late 1780s, aged about 25, she was acting as occasional amanuensis for the ailing judge18 who had long since given her her freedom. Though not a writer, she was clearly intelligent and sufficiently well educated to perform such a role. A painting, still in the possession of the Mansfield family and supposedly by Zoffany, depicts Dido in the grounds of Kenwood.19 Ignatius Sancho was painted by Gainsborough. Paintings of slaves, or with slaves in them, were not unusual in aristocratic households at the time.

Equiano was a free man by the time he published his book, and we know what he looked like from the frontispiece portrait of the author (Fig 1, p 8), which, it is assumed, he commissioned from artists whom he personally knew. Both of them are listed as subscribers in the first edition of 1789. The stipple-and-line engraving by Daniel Orme (1766-1832) is from an original picture by a little known artist called William Denton. Orme showed work at the Royal Academy and was appointed engraver to George III. The portrait of Equiano shows a man in a dark navy coat, with white waistcoat and starched frilled cravat. He looks confident and gravely out at the reader, holding in his hand an open book inscribed “ACTS; CHAP IV.V.

12”, which Biblical verse states: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

Notes and references

3 Ref. 1, p 147.
5 Cugoano, Olaudah. Thoughts and sentiments on the evil and wicked traffic of the slavery and commerce of the human species… (T Becket, 1787).
7 The date is disputed by Professor Vincent Carretta and Paul Edwards, leading scholars on Equiano: contemporary records indicate that Whitefield was in America in 1765, rather than 1766. However, when one considers the insecurity and complexity of Equiano’s life and the fact that he was writing his memoirs in his middle age and presumably with few written documents to which to refer, the accuracy and detail of his story is admirable.
8 Denford, Steven & Hellings, David. Streets of Old Holborn (CHS, 1999), p 55.
12 Founded in 1787 by such eminent persons as Granville Sharp and Wilberforce and supported by many others, especially Equiano and his friends. London is still the headquarters of the anti-slavery movement. The Society’s successor, Anti-slavery International, is based at The Stablesyard, Broomgrove, London SW9.
13 Reproduced in Ref. 4, Appendix F, pp 373-5.
14 According to Vincent Carretta (Ref. 4).
15 The Plaisterer’s Hall, in which Equiano had lodged as a subtenant of a goldsmith called William Rolfe, was designed by Wren to replace the medieval hall destroyed in the Great Fire; the Wren building was, in turn, burned down in 1882.

Gene Adams, who has lived in Camden since 1958, was Museums Adviser to the Inner London Education Authority, organising educational programmes at Kenwood. Her article on Dido (see note 19) has attracted international interest.