

IT'S NOT UNPATRIOTIC TO TELL THE WHOLE TRUTH ABOUT BRITAIN AND END OF SLAVERY

Until very recently, most people in Britain would have said that this country's most significant involvement in the transatlantic slave trade was our heroic decision to abolish it. In the past few years, this culturally ingrained consensus has been challenged by a renewed attention to Britain's long-lasting legacy of slavery – and to the many families and institutions that profited from the enslavement of Africans. In the ongoing struggle to determine the meaning of this history, individuals and institutions across Britain's political spectrum are grappling with the same pivotal question: how do we remember our past?

For the campaigners seeking to build a new monument in Portsmouth commemorating Britain's West Africa Squadron – the Royal Navy unit tasked with intercepting slave ships after Britain outlawed the trade in 1807 – the answer is simple.

Colin Kemp, the retired businessman who is raising £70,000 to put up a statue of a naval officer freeing an enslaved African, launched his campaign in the Daily Mail with the frank declaration: "I think we have got very little to apologise for."

Penny Mordaunt, the Conservative MP for Portsmouth North, is among the many Tory peers and MPs loudly backing the memorial, which has also received a £25,000 donation from the party's former deputy chair Michael Ashcroft. "Yes, Britain had a role in the slave trade," Mordaunt wrote in the Daily Mail. "But let's be clear about something else too. We ended it. Our biggest contribution to the evil trade was to end it."

The statue's backers see their campaign as a correction to what Mordaunt calls "anti-British, grievance-based" attempts to "rewrite our history in the bleakest way". But their own account of the squadron's history is a rose-tinted one, which neglects historical facts and erases space for a more nuanced memory of Britain's past.

The campaign's fundraising website claims, incorrectly, that "Britain was the first country to ban slavery, we used our own ships, men and money to enforce this ban". (Denmark was the first European country to ban the slave trade, in 1803, and Haiti was established as the world's first free Black republic in 1804.) Echoing the campaigners, Mordaunt claims that the West Africa Squadron, which was active until the 1860s, was "the main actor in physically destroying the slave trade", but this is a dramatic overstatement: though the squadron is credited with capturing 1,600 ships and freeing 150,000 enslaved Africans, more than 3 million people were trafficked across the Atlantic while it was active.

According to the campaign, the statue will depict three key parts of the story of the West Africa Squadron: "the evil of slavery, the bravery of the sailors and the new life for the freed Africans".

Britain banned the slave trade in 1807, after almost 20 years of parliamentary debate on the matter. It took another quarter-century for Britain to abolish slavery across the empire, and another five years after that for the full emancipation of the enslaved.

The West Africa Squadron was deployed from 1808 with the task of stopping British slave-trading ships, but this initial enforcement took on a more humanitarian bent as the squadron began to target the ships of other countries as well. The campaign for a monument is correct that significant resources were committed to this mission: over a period of 60 years, the Royal Navy spent millions of pounds on the squadron, and 1,600 sailors lost their lives. But even this was hugely insufficient: the ships were old, slow and too few in number, and the unit is estimated to have intercepted fewer than 10% of the ships involved in the slave trade.

More significantly, “the new life for the freed Africans” rescued by the squadron was hardly free. The estimated 150,000 men, women and children whose ships were captured suffered continued exploitation and degradation at the hands of the British.

After intercepting slave ships bound for the Americas, the West Africa Squadron sailed the formerly enslaved human cargo to British colonies; namely, Sierra Leone and Saint Helena. Once docked, captured Africans were made to remain onboard ships for long periods (sometimes months) in squalid conditions while lengthy British bureaucracy ensued: this led to high rates of unnecessary deaths and disease.

Once allowed off the ships, the “liberated Africans” – as they were known at the time – were not repatriated to their home countries; they were instead subject to forced hard labour under poor conditions, reminiscent of the slavery they narrowly escaped. Military conscription was the fate of “liberated” men; “liberated” children were subject to apprenticeship, where they worked for a master with no wage for a number of years. In Sierra Leone, there are reports of unmarried “liberated” women being forced into marriage.

The legitimate effort to remember the history of the West Africa Squadron should not require the repetition of falsehoods, like the myth of the “liberated Africans” or the misconception that the Royal Navy “ended slavery”.

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Emancipation was not simply given to the enslaved by benevolent sailors. It was fought for. This history deserves commemoration just as much as the advocacy of William Wilberforce and the work of the squadron. Britain’s decision to finally abolish slavery in 1833 was itself influenced by the 1831-32 slave revolt in Jamaica, also known as the Christmas rebellion, which helped shock parliament into acting.

One year ago, in a powerful essay for the Guardian’s Cotton Capital project, Gary Younge addressed our nation’s ability to “forget” the gritty realities of our slaving past. Far from an innocent moment of amnesia, this “forgetting” is a destructive task, and a “privilege of the powerful”.

What we choose to remember of Britain’s legacy of slavery does not seem to require adherence to historical fact, but refers instead to some axiomatic, felt understanding about who we are as a nation. And so the pursuit of historical truth becomes an “anti-British” blasphemy, seen as an attempt to vandalise the myth that Britain’s only

relationship to slavery was to abolish it.

Acknowledging the complicated history of the West Africa Squadron is not an unpatriotic lament; it is part of establishing a healthier relationship with the complexities of our past, based on a sturdier and more honest foundation. Britain's history of abolition can still be a proud one – as long as it is not built on mistruths.

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