

The Gregson Syndicate

William Gregson

William Gregson was born 12th January 1721 in Liverpool. He came from humble origins; he was the son of a porter named John Gregson but unfortunately his mother is unknown. The beginnings of his working life were also humble, he had worked as a rope-maker during his youth, a profession which was vital to Liverpool's shipping industry.

He was clearly a very ambitious man; in 1744, when Gregson was just twenty-three, he and four partners invested in a new, locally built 80 tonne ship known as the *Carolina*, one of the thirty slave ships trading out of Liverpool during this time. The investment was not a success; the vessel was fated never to return to Liverpool. Instead, after losing 48 out of 332 slaves on route from the Bight of Biafra to Kingston, Jamaica, the *Carolina* was lost at sea. Undeterred, Gregson purchased the *Blackburn* with three partners only two years later. This vessel was seized by the French along with the Africans on board. Despite these early mishaps, Gregson invested in many more ships over the next half century, eventually rising to the top of Liverpoolian society. He became so successful that he was elected major of Liverpool in 1762, alongside a successful political career. He remained in this office for the customary one year and lent his energies mostly to widening Liverpool's streets, extending its canals and modernising its docks.

The years between 1776 and 1783 - when the British were at war with the American colonies – saw a decline in British slaving activity. The British slaving merchants were intimidated by the regular warfare (exacerbated by French and Dutch intervention on the part of the American colonies), and as a result the first five years of the conflict saw a drop of 60 percent in slaver activity (215,915 Africans were embarked on British slave ships in the five years before the war, which fell to 85,408). As a result, Gregson – feeling that dispatching ships was inviting disaster – took a three year break from the trade. His last ship before this hiatus, the *Gregson*, left Liverpool in July 1777.

In 1780, Gregson re-entered the slave trade, taking co-ownership of the *William* alongside his sons John and James, George Case, James Aspinall and Edward Wilson. This ship went on to make five successful voyages for the Gregson Syndicate before being shipwrecked in 1787. During the course of his career, Gregson became the sole or part owner in a large number of slave ships, the most famous is of course the *Zong*, which he purchased in 1781 during the height of his slave trading empire.

Sadly, the tragedy of the *Zong* massacre did not bring about an end to Gregson's business. Unfortunately rather, it thrived. By the 1780s, Gregson was in his sixties (being sixty when the *Zong* massacre took place), and Gregson clearly felt it was time to hand over to his sons. In the 1790s, they effectively took over the business. His last direct involvement in the business was with three ships the *Ariel*, the *George*, and the *Will* in 1793. By the time of his retirement, Gregson had been in the business for half a century. By the time of his death in 1800, he had become one of Liverpool's leading citizens and businessmen and had branched out into the insurance and banking industries. Over the course of his long life, he had a stake in 152 known slave voyages, and thus was responsible for investing in vessels that had carried 58,201 Africans (out of which 49,053 had survived the journey) to the Americas.

Gregson's life is an example of a rags to riches story and demonstrates how an individual born into a working family could rise to the top of society by careful investments in the slave trade. It is also possible from his investments, as well as his actions in the wake of the *Zong* massacre, to discern what type of man Gregson must have been. He was clearly a man of tireless character to have climbed so high in Liverpool society from humble origins. He also must have been a shrewd businessman to have been in the trade so long, and to have branched out into other financially orientated fields. On the other hand, he must have been an incredibly callous individual to have profited at the expense of so many lives; this is especially clear in his ruthless pursuit of compensation in the wake of the *Zong* tragedy.

Gregson also appears to have been an extravagant man, who often held lavish parties for the members of his company, the Gregson syndicate. This also demonstrates the callousness that clearly pervaded his nature – the fact that he was able to enjoy the monetary rewards that came with success as a slaver, whilst the victims of his trade suffered immensely.

The fact that Gregson had established a close association with the Case family – one of the older and more established families of the Liverpool elite, shows that he was determined to climb the social ladder and move easily within the upper echelons of Liverpool society. Interestingly, a certain George Case appears to have been a slave trader himself (listed as co-owning the ship *Swallow*) with Gregson's sons, and was married to Gregson's daughter.

John Gregson

It was common for successful Liverpool slave merchants to incorporate male members of the family into the trade. The son of William Gregson,

he indeed followed in his father's footsteps by entering the slave trade. In 1780, he, along with his two brothers James and William junior (along with four others George Case, Edward Faulkner, James Aspinall and Richard Wicksted) co-owned the ship *Swallow*. The *Swallow* went on to deliver 186 Africans (out of 200) to Tortola before it was lost in a shipwreck. Undeterred, he subsequently co-owned the slave ship *William* with his father, his brother James, and two other experiences slaving partners James Aspinall and Edward Wilson. He was considered as one of Liverpool's 50 leading slave merchants. In addition to property in the borough of Liverpool, he also owned property in the boroughs of Everton and West Derby. He was elected mayor of Liverpool in 1784 – the controversy of the *Zong* massacre did not prevent him from being elected to the post. John Gregson appears to have been a more active, civic minded mayor than his father – he was to become the first subscriber for a scheme to establish a set of Sunday schools for poor children (this generous gesture shows the unfortunate dichotomy between his, amongst others' treatment of his countrymen and those who were cruelly sold as slaves). He was the host of Liverpool's (probable) first masquerade ball. He took over the business from his father, alongside his two brothers, in 1793.

James Gregson

The son of William Gregson. He also co-owned the *William* with his brother, father, Wilson and Aspinall. Like his father and brother, he was also considered one of Liverpool's 50 leading slave merchants. He took over the business from his father alongside his two brothers in 1793. He is known to have amassed considerable wealth from the slave trade, which allowed him to live the lifestyle of a gentleman. By the time of his death on 20th July 1817, the value of his estate was £3,654 (over £250,000 in today's money, although was likely much more). It is known that he resided in Rodney Street, Liverpool, a street of fashionable Georgian houses. At the time of its development during the 1780s, it was located on the south-eastern fringes of the borough of Liverpool. Gregson's estate value shows the amount of wealth that could still be amassed by the slave trade even in the 1800s, less than two decades before its abolition.

Edward Wilson

A Liverpool slave trader and a member of the *Gregson Syndicate*. He was certainly an experienced trader by the time of the *Zong* tragedy (having co-owned the *Swallow* and the *William* for certain). He had co-owned the *William* alongside Gregson, his sons, son-in-law and Aspinall. He is known to have died in 1804 as a rich man – the value of his personal estate upon his death was £10,000 (the lowest conversion rate on this value being £444,000 in today's money). Despite

the lucrative career Wilson undoubtedly had, very little is known about his life. It can be ascertained that he was trusted by Gregson. This can be seen in his inclusion in the *Gregson Syndicate* – consisting of mainly family members of Gregson, and his co-ownership of the *William* (again predominantly owned by relatives of Gregson). The notoriety of Gregson has perhaps cast a shadow over Wilson, but he was clearly a successful slave trader in his own right, as can be seen by the value of his estate upon his death.

James Aspinall

James Aspinall was an experienced slaver who ranked amongst Liverpool's pre-eminent traders. He is believed to have been born in 1729, making him only eight years younger than William Gregson. Prior to becoming the co-owner of the *Zong*, (alongside William Gregson, his sons James and John Gregson, and Edward Wilson) he had previously owned ships with Gregson senior (like Wilson, these included the *Swallow* and the *William*). He was around fifty-two when he took co-ownership of the *Zong*. He is believed to have died in 1788.

Crew of the Zong

Luke Collingwood: Captain of the Zong

Luke Collingwood was a curious choice for captain of a slave ship. His career, prior to captaining the *Zong* had been that of a surgeon. He was an experienced sailor; having participated in between 9 and 11 voyages as the ship's surgeon. Despite this, the route to captaining a slave ship was not normally passed through the station of ship's surgeon, although this was not entirely unknown. Collingwood transferred from his position as doctor on board the *William*, to become captain of the *Zong* in March 1781, and thus was making his debut as ship's master. It was not a good debut; in fact, Collingwood was to die just after landing in Jamaica, although the cause of his death is unknown. He undertook the voyage as captain of the *Zong* when he was in his forties. Whilst the date of his birth is uncertain, it is possible to deduce from this that he was born between 1732 and 1741.

Reverend George Gregory, who was the vicar of West Ham in 1783, and had gotten to know Collingwood when he was working as a clerk in the office of a Liverpool merchant, left a description of the *Zong's* captain. In the second edition of his essays, published in 1788, he described Collingwood as having had a better education than those normally involved in the slave trade. Curiously, he relates that to him Collingwood appeared 'liberal, benevolent and well-intentioned'. This statement would be easy to dismiss if not for the fact that Gregory was an ardent

abolitionist, a critic of the slave trade and reputedly an honest man. He did admit that Collingwood was afflicted with the same 'unjust prejudices' of all those connected to the slave trade, and who 'consider the Negroes as an inferior race of beings who we are entitled to treat as we please'. Despite this, Gregory offers another contradiction in Collingwood's nature, stating that 'with the upmost sincerity' Collingwood was 'of a milder and more humane disposition than most who are engaged in the slave trade'.

Whether or not there is much merit in Reverend Gregory's remarks about Collingwood, the captain of the *Zong* has tended to be blamed for the massacre. This is not an unfair assessment, as he was the one who gave the orders, however two things should be considered. The first is that Collingwood has been described by the ship's mate James Kelsall as being 'delirious' and 'or in a fit of lunacy' when he gave the orders. There is a possibility that Collingwood may not have acted in this manner had he not been ill. The second point, more importantly, is that by holding Collingwood as solely responsible for the atrocity committed onboard the *Zong*, the Gregson syndicate, and the wider slave trade in general, was absolved of their share of the blame for the tragedy.

James Kelsall: the first mate

The experienced James Kelsall served as the first mate on the ill-fated *Zong* voyage. He was the man, owing to position, who would have been traditionally responsible for the process of loading and storing food and water, as well as checking the supplies as the voyage progressed. As it turned out, when the water was loaded at Sao Paulo, Kelsall was onshore at a factory. It is unclear why he was not present, interestingly though, it could be taken as an indication that himself and captain Luke Collingwood did not have a very good relationship. This is entirely possible, as it is usual for a first mate to take over captaincy of a ship in the event of the leader being incapacitated – as was the case with Collingwood. Collingwood however, did not choose Kelsall but Robert Stubbs. Kelsall was aggrieved by this, disputed the issue with Collingwood and was subsequently suspended from his position. He was however, reinstated only two weeks later because they needed his experience.

Kelsall served as a witness when the case was brought to trial. At first, he claimed that he was 'shocked' at the suggestion that some of the slaves should be thrown overboard in order to spare the rest, and he objected at first. There is no way of knowing whether this is the truth, but if it was, his objections waned quickly as the crew made the unanimous decision to murder the slaves and there were no reported objections. It is likely that Kelsall made his admission in order to try and

absolve himself of the blame and did not object at the time. This is believable as he later admitted that he helped to throw Africans overboard because it was the captain's orders. He showed his callous nature by admitting that 'he did not consider whether it was criminal or not'. The fact that he mentioned the term 'criminal' rather than 'moral' shows that he did not stop to think about the lives he was terminating by following these orders. Additionally, he was clearly not a man that was afraid of confrontation, as he showed in his disagreement with Collingwood over not being appointed as captain of the *Zong*, so it seems unlikely that he would have had a problem with raising objections if he had considered it regarding the slaves.

Kelsall kept a logbook during his time as first mate on board the *Zong*. Unfortunately, this record did not survive and was either lost or purposefully destroyed. From his testimony, there is one brief section offering insight into the world of the Africans. Kelsall recorded a brief conversation with an English speaking African who told him that rumour had spread that they were about to be killed as the ship's supplies were running low and begged that 'they might be suffered to live and would not ask for meat or water but could live without either until they arrived at their determined port.' Despite this pleading, he still had a hand in throwing them overboard.

According to the transcript of the *Zong* court case, Kelsall was summoned to London to act as a witness at the trial, however he did not show up despite the fact that he allegedly arrived in London a few days prior to the case being heard in court.

Robert Stubbs

Robert Stubbs was unusual in that he was the only passenger on board the *Zong* (the rest being slaves and crew). Joining the ship to make his escape back to Britain, he could not have been unaware of the unpleasanties that awaited him, for he had been a slave ship captain himself some thirty years earlier. The voyage, captaining the *Black Joke* - an ironically named ship - had been entirely unsuccessful. The vessel had been captured by the French and the slaves had not been delivered to a British colony as intended, but instead to Martinique. This had not put Stubbs off - he had gone on to part-own a slave ship and worked throughout the 1770s as a ship's broker in London.

In 1780 he was appointed governor of Anomabu, which turned out to be a disastrous appointment. Indeed, it appeared almost inexplicable. One man who worked with Stubbs accused him of being 'of such low education that he can neither read nor write.' He was also seemingly quarrelsome. In addition to this, he

neglected the fort at Anomabu and its supplies and cheated his staff and local traders out of money, clothing and provisions and he was described as a 'bankrupt scoundrel.'

A further testimony to his unsavoury character and unsuitability for the job emerged in his dealings with the Africans where he showed his inexperience and unwillingness to listen to more experienced men who could have aided him. His foolishness on one occasion stood out above all others; he ordered a parade at the fort in order to show the Africans his strength and command and shut the gates when the natives went there for their weekly allowances. Unsurprisingly, relationships soured amongst the natives and the clerical and military staff. Stubbs' days as governor were numbered just months after his arrival.

He was humiliated in epic fashion after his dismissal three days later, when he was physically seized by a group of men, who bound his hands, dragged him downstairs and dumped him on a beach outside the fort and pulled his shirt and breeches almost off. He was unceremoniously exposed in front of a group of natives. It was alleged that he had abused his position by slave trading in his own interest, but this was likely a cover up for the resentment his outrageous behaviour had caused during his tenure as governor. He had to flee to England on board the *Zong* because the crew that had accompanied him on his outward voyage had had enough of his disruptive behaviour, so much so that the captain wrote a letter of complaint to London denouncing him as a 'wicked and treacherous' character.

Such was the character of Robert Stubbs. Despite this, the makeshift crew onboard the *Zong* appear to have welcomed his experience (such that it was), to the point where he was appointed stand-in captain ahead of Kelsall. Despite this his account of what happened on board the *Zong* has become the accepted version of events. He was the only one to give evidence in court, and so his story became integral to the story of the *Zong*.

Abolitionists

Granville Sharp

Granville Sharp (b. 1735) was the son of Thomas Sharp – Archdeacon of Northumberland and theological writer, and Judith Wheler (daughter of the English clergyman and travel writer George Wheler). Born into a large family (he had five surviving older brothers and five younger sisters), he was educated at Durham School but mainly at home due to lack of available funds for his education. Despite his undoubtedly keen intellect, Sharp was apprenticed to a

London cotton-draper at fifteen, which offered little mental stimulation. He was clearly clever and determined – teaching himself Greek and Hebrew to better argue with fellow apprentices. During this time, he also carried out genealogical research for one of his masters, a man named Henry Willoughby, who, thanks to Sharp's work, was able to take his place in the house of Lords.

His apprenticeship ended in 1757 and his parents died shortly afterwards. He then took up a humble position as a clerk in the Ordnance Office at the tower of London. This position allowed him plenty of free time for scholarly and intellectual pursuits. In addition to his interests in abolition, Sharp was a keen musician and multi-instrumentalist (his bass voice was described by George III as 'the best in Britain' and he played clarinet, oboe and harp amongst others).

He had a strong dislike for social and legal injustice, as evidenced by his actions in the cause of abolition. His first experience of the horrors of slavery occurred in 1765 when Sharp was visiting his brother's surgery and met a man named Jonathan Strong. Strong was a slave from Barbados who had been badly beaten by his master with a pistol to the head. He had been left close to blindness and cast out as a result. Sharp and his brother tended Strong's injuries and had him admitted to a hospital (where he stayed for 4 months). They paid for his treatment and found him employment with a quaker apothecary friend of theirs. Sharp also saved Strong from re-enslavement on two further occasions, earning him the nickname.

In 1769 Sharp published *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery*, a very early work in England's attack on slavery. He took on the case of an escaped slave named James Somerset who appealed to Sharp for help after he had been imprisoned on a ship bound for the British colony of Jamaica. This resulted in Somerset being freed and his supporters celebrating a great victory. After the *Zong* massacre, Sharp - by then a well-known abolitionist – valiantly attempted to mount a murder prosecution. Unfortunately, this never transpired but this was by no means the end of Sharp's quest for abolition. In 1787, he became the chairman of the newly founded *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. In his time as chair, he worked tirelessly for the cause, arguing that the society should target slavery itself rather than the slave trade. In this he was outvoted by the committee but he was not deterred.

Sharp was seventy-one years old when he heard that the Act of Abolition had been passed on the 25th March 1807. By this time, he had outlived most of his associates and opponents and was no longer a driving force, having been taken over by younger, like-minded abolitionists such as Thomas Clarkson and William

Wilberforce. Sadly, Sharp did not live to see the final abolition, as he died in 1813. Nonetheless, his work, achieved through sheer determination, proved the catalyst for major political change, which is to his everlasting credit.

Olaudah Equiano (also known as Gustavus Vassa)

Olaudah Equiano was undoubtedly a remarkable man. Born in 1745 in the kingdom of Benin (now Southern Nigeria), he was the youngest of seven surviving children. He was enslaved as a child (according to his own account, he was kidnapped at the age of eleven alongside his sister, taken to Virginia and was sold to a royal navy officer named Michael Henry Pascal).

Pascal renamed Equiano "Gustavus Vassa" after the sixteenth century king of Sweden (who had begun the protestant reform in Sweden). Equiano travelled to England with Pascal, and when the Seven Years' War broke out, Equiano accompanied him as a valet. During this time, Equiano was also trained in seamanship and was expected to assist the ship's crew during battles. His experiences led him to write eyewitness accounts of the siege of Louisbourg (1758), the Battle of Lagos (1759) and the capture of Belle Île (1761).

Pascal appears to have treated Equiano with kindness and showed him favour. As a result, he was sent to Pascal's sister-in-law in Britain so he could attend school and learn to read and write, and subsequently learn English. In 1759, Equiano converted to Christianity and was baptised at St. Margaret's church in Westminster. Despite the kindness showed to him, he was sold in 1762 to Captain James Doran of the *Charming Sally*. This saw him transported back to the Caribbean - onto Monserrat in the Leeward Islands. There, he was sold to an American quaker named Robert King (also a merchant trading in the Caribbean).

King helped to improve his reading and writing skills and allowed him to trade profitably for himself as well as King. In 1766, he was able to buy his freedom, and King urged him to stay on as his business partner. Equiano, aware that this was a dangerous option (he was almost sold back into slavery in Georgia) decided to return to England. He was clearly not a man to sit idly; he continued working aboard ships, and in 1773 he travelled to the Arctic onboard the HMS *Racehorse* as it attempted to find a northeast route to India. On board, he worked with Dr Charles Irving (who had developed a distilling process for sea water, and later made a fortune from it). Later, Equiano was recruited by Irving for a project on the Mosquito Coast in Central America managing slaves as labourers on a plantation. This failed, although the pair developed a long standing friendship. Equiano returned to England in 1777.

He settled in London in the 1780s and became actively involved in the abolitionist movement. He informed abolitionist Granville Sharp about the *Zong* massacre. In his later years, encouraged (and supported financially) by his friends in the abolitionist movement, he wrote and published *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the Africa*. The first edition appeared in 1789 and was one of the earliest known works to be widely read in England, becoming a best seller in 1792 and subsequently published in the US, Russia, Germany and Holland. Whilst Equiano's experiences may have been somewhat atypical for a slave, it was the first influential example of a genre that became known as *Slave Narrative*.

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