

## **Cass - an investigation Transcript**

0:11

John Cass. This is the history of John Cass for the Revealing the City's Past project.

0:20

Cass lived from 1661 to 1718.

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His statue by Louis-Francois Roubiliac, dated 1751, is entitled Sir John Cass and is situated in the Guildhall at the City of London.

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This statue of Sir John Cass is an interesting metaphor for how the most violent elements of the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans can appear in plain sight, disguised as something benign and unassuming.

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The City of London greatly profited from the economy of the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans.

1:08

In 1660, city merchants and the Stuart royal family set up the Company of Royal Adventurers of England trading with Africa to exploit the West Coast of Africa.

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This organisation would become the Royal African Company or

RAC, led by the Duke of York, later to become King James the Second.

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It was predominantly concerned with trading enslaved Africans before switching to the trade of extracted resources of gold and ivory.

1:48

As a result of a new charter in 1672, the company monopolised trade to Africa until 1698.

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Between 1672 and the early 1720's, the Royal African Company used ships sailing from London, Bristol and Liverpool to forcibly transport nearly 150,000 African people into slavery and shipped more enslaved African women, men and children to the West Indies, also known as the Caribbean and the Americas, than any other single institution during the entire period of the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans.

2:37

This statue was commissioned by the Sir John Cass Foundation, (renamed the Portal Trust) on its founding in 1751.

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In 2020, due to (ass's active role in the Royal African Company, the Foundation commissioned further research to explore his involvement.

3:00

Cass was one of only 54 investors who owned 43% of RAC shares.

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Owning more than £5000 in stock was an election requirement for the role of company Assistant.

3:18

The research found that alongside this role, which he held between 1705 to 1708, Cass sat on two of the five RAC committees and, as a member of the Royal African Companies Court of Assistance, was responsible for tasks such as setting budgets and giving detailed instructions to the captains of the slave ships.

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Cass directly dealt with slave agents in the African forts and Caribbean.

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During his tenure, there were 55 voyages transporting over 14,000 enslaved persons, 2347 of whom died on the voyage.

4:06

It is worth noting that the RAC's records of enslavement demonstrate how people were dehumanised as an accounting exercise.

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This further perpetuated the devaluation of human life.

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These accounts dispassionately note: how many people could be transported; how to exercise control to increase productivity;

4:34

How many deaths during the Middle Passage (the treacherous journey from Africa to the Americas across the Atlantic Ocean) were acceptable to create a profit margin;

4:46

How those who had died perished and how to minimise this for calculations related to insurance claims and trading profits.

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This mindset was continuous and reflected again some 60 years later in the legal proceedings related to the Zong Massacre of 1781.

5:09

The case, initially heard at the Guildhall in 1783, centred on an attempt to claim compensation for the deaths of over 130 enslaved Africans who were thrown overboard by the crew of this ship, as they had been insured as cargo and could not be claimed as a loss if they had died on board the ship.

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The insurers ultimately refused to pay and the public legal proceedings became a key argument for the abolition of slavery, with Olaudah Equiano and Granville Sharp campaigning

further to have the ship's crew prosecuted for murder while the perpetrators of the Zong massacre were not prosecuted.

6:00

It is key to communicate that what had begun as a dehumanising accounting procedure was rightly judged for what it was, an episode of heartless mass murder of African people.

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This is why it is important to highlight the tone of the 1663 to 1821 records of the RAC, which are filled with displays of this brutal accountancy approach to human life.

6:32

There is evidence to suggest that Cass chose to be involved with the RAC for political gain.

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After unsuccessfully campaigning to become Alderman for the City of London ward of the Portsoken in 1701, he achieved greater prominence in City circles by becoming an assistant in the Royal African Company.

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It seems that his philanthropy also served his political ambitions after establishing in 1709 that his will would provide for the founding of local schools in the London Borough of Hackney and the Portsoken, where children would be educated in the knowledge of the Christian religion according to the principles of the Church of England.

7:24

He campaigned for a fourth time for the position of Alderman in the Portsoken and was successfully appointed in 1709.

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Therefore, we can see a picture painted of philanthropy for the local poor and disenfranchised in London being funded by wealth gained from participation in the violent industry of the trade in Enslaved Africans.

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The leverage gained from his position as RAC Company assistant and the goodwill generated by his local philanthropy clearly served his personal and political ambitions.

8:09

These acts were not unique to Cass and are part of a common pattern for those who became rich and powerful directly from the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans.

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This statue was made 30 years after Cass's death when his incomplete will was enacted, creating an endowment for the Sir John Cass Foundation.

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This statue was not designed to be seen on a human to human scale.

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It would have been viewed from below.

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Installed at the Portsoken School established by Cass during this time overlooking Aldgate Rd. This statue was posthumously designed and displayed to evoke the patriarchal image of a founding father and ingratitude for the endowment created by his ill-gotten wealth, the details of which have been marginalised in the retelling of Cass's history.

9:18

The statue has been on loan to the Guildhall since 1980.

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However, in 2001, on the 250th anniversary of the Sir John Cass Foundation, many replicas were commissioned.

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The recent reckoning with Cass's legacy was accompanied by the removal of the other statues of his likeness.

9:43

So numerous effigies of this man remain to be recontextualized. If we end by returning to the metaphor that I see in this artwork, the most violent elements of the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans appearing in plain sight, disguised as something benign and unassuming.

10:08

The orphaned status of the statue but long term residence in a significant public and political space mirrors the untold stories of Britain's trade of enslaved Africans and the wider colonial past.

10:26

These violent acts against human beings were transposed into numbers through cold accounting exercises so that the economy of slavery would grow the wealth of the City of London and the United Kingdom at large.

10:44

This history is here publicly for anyone to see the impacts and legacy built into the infrastructure of the City and indeed the nation.

10:56

But the story is often orphaned without anyone taking responsibility for unpacking the truth and leading a process of healing and reconciliation that begins with recognition and accountability.

11:14

Instead, it has languished unaddressed, in plain sight, treated as discreet and irrelevant.

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It is worth reflecting on who benefits from these stories remaining untold, the violence removed or minimised, and considering if and how we can heal from this unaddressed trauma.

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Hopefully this text and further research will be the start of a process of confronting these histories so that we can ultimately reach justice and healing.

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This was co-authored by Rachael Minott and peer reviewed by Doctor Carol Ann Dixon.