Sheffield and Slavery in the Atlantic World, c. 1620 - 1880

WRoCAH funded Collaborative Doctoral Award between Department of History, University of Sheffield and Sheffield City Archives and Local Studies Library

Lead Academic and Partner Organisation Supervisors

Dr Rosie Knight  
Department of History  
University of Sheffield

Dr Cheryl Bailey  
Senior Archivist  
Sheffield City Archives and Local Studies Library

Project summary

This project investigates the links between Sheffield and the trade and enslavement of African people in the Atlantic world. The student will be working with Sheffield City Archives and Local Studies Library to improve the accessibility of their holdings and public engagement with relevant collections and sources.

PhD Project description

Plantation hoes sold by Joseph Smith of Sheffield, 1816 (SLSL: 672 SSTQ)

Sheffield is well known as a hub of anti-slavery activity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The city’s radical politics are central to its heritage, and are widely represented and celebrated in local museums and archives as well as academic scholarship. Recent work by archives and heritage organisations, writers and creative industries, and
academics — often in collaboration or conversation with one another — has begun to reveal a more nuanced picture of Sheffield’s connections to slavery. This project will re-examine Sheffield’s relationship with the mass-enslavement of Africans in the Americas, asking: in what ways were local individuals, families, and businesses invested or involved in the trade and enslavement of African people in the Atlantic world?

Connections between the local area and Atlantic slavery include local individuals and families involved in the trade and enslavement of Africans — for instance, in sponsoring slave-trading voyages or as plantation owners. There are also important manufacturing and business links worthy of further investigation. Were Sheffield-made goods amongst those traded for enslaved people on the West African coast? What kind of relationships did Sheffield-based companies have with Liverpool’s merchants and traders? And how significant was the trade of plantation tools to slaving societies like the United States? Interrogating Sheffield’s links to the Atlantic world might also include the examination of pro-slavery support in the local area as well as the activities of Black abolitionists who visited Sheffield.

The range in these links allows the student significant scope to determine their focus, and we would invite the successful candidate to develop their research questions in relation to their own interests and experience. The particular approach to the research will also be developed according to the successful student’s experience and supervisor guidance, and could draw upon memory studies, materiality, family history, microhistory, or other methodological approaches. The student will thus have considerable independence in devising their own project that speaks to the central question of Sheffield’s relationship with slavery in the Atlantic world and builds upon existing work on the topic.

The student will make use of the wealth of resources for the study of the topic based at the partner organisation, Sheffield City Archives and Local Studies Library, whose collections include trade directories, newspapers, family papers, business records, and much more. While the bulk of the student’s research will be focused at the SCA, there is ample scope for the student to take the project further — for instance, making use of the National Archives in London or the Archives Centre at Liverpool’s Maritime Museum.

The subject is of considerable public interest and an important element of the student’s project will be working with the SCA/LSL to devise public engagement activities to help communicate their research findings to a wide audience and enhance both the accessibility of relevant SCA/LSL holdings and engagement with those sources.

**About Sheffield City Archives and Local Studies Library**

The Sheffield City Archives acquires, preserves, manages and makes accessible the documentary history of Sheffield dating back to the 12th century. They maintain a purpose-built searchroom for research at Sheffield Archives (Shoreham St) and reading room at the Central Library (Surrey St), open 6 days per week collectively. As outlined in their annual service plan, SCA’s key aims include enabling more people to access more information in more places; and making a difference to local people and supporting local communities by engaging with personal and community heritage, engaging with lifelong learning, enriching people’s lives, and reducing social isolation.
The SCA have undertaken numerous initiatives over the past few decades around the topic of slavery and abolition. They produced (and revised) a research guide on the subject of slavery and abolition, participated in the Sheffield, Slavery, and its Legacies project, and recently hosted a six-month long project with Désirée Reynolds — ‘Dig Where You Stand’. Dig Where You Stand explored the presence of people of colour in the archives and addressed issues of reparative justice and legacy, and Sheffield’s links to slavery formed one aspect of this work (including recent acquisition of Thomas Staniforth’s diary of 1799). SCA have also published blogs on the subject and contributed to the review of ‘Sheffield: its history and heritage told through its streets, monuments, museums, libraries and archives’ for the 2021 Race Equality Commission. The appointed student will play a key role in enhancing and furthering this work.

Engagement, outreach, dissemination and impact initiatives

The overarching aims of the student’s work with Sheffield City Archives and Local Studies Library is to improve the accessibility of their holdings relevant to the history of slavery and to further develop public engagement with relevant collections and sources. They will take an active role in working towards SCA’s objectives to enable more people to access more information in more places; and to make a difference to local people by engaging with personal and community heritage and promoting lifelong learning.

One important aspect of the student’s work will entail updating SCA’s Sheffield and Slavery Guide, which acts as an introduction to the subject for a general audience as well as a guide for researchers. Secondly, they will develop new activities aimed towards engaging the public with their research and relevant sources or collections at SCA. The precise activity/ies will be determined by the student with SCA and the project supervisors, and could include:

- Workshops or talks (at the archives) using or displaying original source material found as part of the project
- Facilitating a volunteer group to participate in elements of the research
- Creating school projects or curriculum material
- Devising community engagement activities at the archives
- Participation in local festivals

The student will thus gain first-hand experience of working in an archive and designing, delivering, and evaluating public engagement activities, as well as developing leadership and project management skills (with appropriate support). They will play an important part in promoting the work and resources of the archive, sharing knowledge on new platforms and in new spheres, and strengthening the relationship between the Department of History at TUs and the SCA.
Financial support

Studentships for doctoral research are 40 months in duration for full-time study. Awards are subject to satisfactory academic progress. Awards must be taken up in October 2022; no deferrals are possible. Awards will comprise fees at Research Council rates and a maintenance grant (£15,609 in 2021/22). The grant pays the fees at the Home/UK rate; international students are, however, eligible to apply for this Studentship and the difference between the Home/UK and International fee will be met by the University of Sheffield for a successful international applicant. Awards may be taken up on a part-time basis if a student is eligible to undertake part-time study; international applicants may be required to study full-time by the terms of their visa.

Qualifications

Strong applicants will have a good first degree in an appropriate subject, as well as a Master’s degree (or be working towards one) and/or professional experience relevant to the scope of the project would be desirable. We are looking for a well-qualified student with a background in History (and experience/demonstrable interest in a relevant area, such as the history of slavery, cities, colonialism, public history, etc.)

Requirements of the Studentship

WRoCAH students are required to undertake a bespoke training package and to complete a Researcher Employability Project of at least a month, a Knowledge Exchange Project, and to engage with Internationalisation.

All WRoCAH students must submit their thesis for examination with the funded period. This is a requirement of the Arts & Humanities Research Council, which provides the funding for WRoCAH, and is a condition of accepting a Studentship.

Before applying for any WRoCAH Studentship, please first ensure that you have read the WRoCAH webpages about the WRoCAH training programme and requirements, as well as other funding opportunities

http://wrocah.ac.uk/
How to apply

By 5pm Wednesday 9 March 2022, applicants are required to submit to WRoCAH an Expression of Interest, which should include:

1. A CV with details of academic qualifications

2. A covering letter comprising a two-page statement to convey your motivation and enthusiasm for the project, and to demonstrate your suitability for your intended PhD studies with the University and Project Partner.

   The covering letter should specifically highlight the following:

   - Your interest in the project and details on why you have chosen that University and Project Partner.
   - How you will apply your current skills, knowledge and experience to undertake a PhD and the approach you would take to develop the project.
   - How the project fits into your career plans and ambitions.

- 16 March 2022: decision on short-listing
  The short-list of candidates to be invited for an interview will be announced on Wednesday 16 March 2022. Short-listed candidates must complete a PhD programme application before interview. If you are short-listed for an interview you will be sent details of how to apply for a place at the University of Sheffield. At that point you will need to submit the names and contact details of two referees, copies of transcripts of your academic qualifications and (if applicable) an IELTS certificate.

- w/c 11 April 2022: interviews
  Interviews will involve the academic supervisor, Project Partner supervisor and a member of the WRoCAH Studentships Committee. They will be conducted online.

For more information about this project contact

Dr Rosie Knight  (rosie.knight@sheffield.ac.uk)

Dr Andrew Heath  (a.d.heath@sheffield.ac.uk)