

# KEYPOINT REVISION: INTERMEDIATE HISTORY

## THIS ACCURSED TRADE: THE BRITISH SLAVE TRADE: 1770-1807

### REVISION FILE

#### **SUPPORT FOR THE SLAVE TRADE**

KP9

It is difficult to understand how a civilised Christian country like Britain could allow the misery and cruelty of the slave trade to continue. However, until it was abolished the slave trade remained very profitable and there were powerful groups who wanted it to continue. The King, members of the Government, the Anglican Church, the Aristocracy and business and trading interests not only supported slavery but also allowed it to develop in a more extreme and cruel form than any other nation. However, it is important to remember that very few people in Britain came into direct contact with the slave trade. Even the merchants who made fortunes from the trade knew little of the cruelty or turned a blind eye to it. For many of them the trade in slaves was no more than a neat row of figures in an accounts book.

#### **THE SUPPORTERS OF THE SLAVE TRADE**

- The merchants and councillors of Liverpool were opposed to the abolition of the slave trade because they claimed it would damage their business and threaten prosperity and jobs in the town.
- British owners of plantations in the West Indies did not want the trade to end because they needed cheap labour.
- Manufacturers who supplied trade goods for Africa did not want the trade to end.

#### **ANTI-ABOLITIONIST ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING THE SLAVE TRADE**

Britain's position as the world's greatest naval power depended on the slave trade. The trade employed thousands of British sailors and taught them seafaring skills. Abolition of the slave trade would destroy Britain's empire and her sea power. The slave trade was very profitable and brought huge wealth to Britain. The government got most of its money from taxes related to the slave trade. Plantation owners argued that abolition would ruin them and there would be no sugar etc. Other countries would take over the trade and the profits if Britain abolished it. Africans were happier, civilized and could be converted to Christianity when they were slaves. Slaves were prisoners of war and would be killed if they could not be sold. Some argued that abolitionists were exaggerating and that slaves were well treated on British ships. Some people believed that abolition of the trade would lead to slave revolts in the West Indies. Many people had racist views and believed Africans were inferior, not ready for freedom and it was God's will that they should be slaves. After 1792, Britain was at war with France and people argued that the country needed money from the slave trade.

#### **METHODS OF THE ANTI-ABOLITIONISTS**

Merchants set up organisations to oppose the abolitionists. Anti abolitionist petitions were sent to Parliament. The African Committee and the West Indies Planters Association were set up to oppose abolition. The ruling Assemblies of West Indian Islands sent petitions to Parliament in support of slavery. Slave owning Members of Parliament voted against abolition of the slave trade. Merchants and plantation owners bribed members of Parliament to vote against abolition. Anti abolitionists gave evidence to Parliament claiming the trade was vital to Britain and was not cruel. Letters were written to newspapers supporting the slave trade.