

Slave campaigner's burial place found in Tottenham Court Road

By MIKE PENTELOW A recent breakthrough in research has revealed that an historic campaigner for the abolition of slavery is buried in Tottenham Court Road.

Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), who had himself been a slave, was buried in the grounds of what was then the Whitfield Tabernacle and is now the American International Church at 79a Tottenham Court Road.

This was confirmed at an exhibition in the church during August entitled "Equiano: An Extraordinary Life".

It had previously been known that Equiano wrote his best selling autobiographical exposure of the horrors of slavery while living at 73 Riding House Street (10 Union Street at the time) in 1789, and before that he lived at 37 Tottenham Street (number 13 at the time).

"We have been searching for his burial place for 50 years," said Arthur Torrington, director of The Equiano Society.

"Professor Vincent Carretta [author of a biography "Equiano, the African"] wrote to me a year ago and asked me to check if Gustavus Vassa [Equiano's slave name] was shown in the Whitfield Tabernacle burial records."

Arthur asked a colleague, David Gleave of Historical Roots, to check the records. "So I went to London Metropolitan Archives a few months ago and found the name Gustus Vasa, 52," said David.

"It was not spelled quite correctly but is very close and the burial date of April 6, 1797 matched the date of Equiano's death and his age at the time.

"I then went to Chingford Mount Cemetery, where some bodies were reburied [in 1898] and they gave me the names of those that were taken there [from Tottenham Court Road].

"His was not one of them and only about five or six were not named. As 30,000 were buried at Whitefield Tabernacle grounds, it is more than likely that Equiano stayed on this site."

More details are on David's website (historicalroots.com).

Another factor supporting this was the fact that Equiano (a dedicated Christian) attended the Tabernacle during his final years, as pointed out by actor Burt Caesar on the opening night of the exhibition.

The Tabernacle had been built in 1756 for the evangelical preacher George Whitefield (1714-1770) who later went to America where Equiano saw him preach.

"I had often heard of this gentleman, and had wished to see and hear him; but I had never before had an opportunity," he wrote in his autobiography 'The Interesting Narrative' [still available as a Penguin Classic].

"When I got into the church I saw this pious man exhorting the people with the greatest fervour and earnestness, and sweating as much as I ever did while in slavery at Montserrat beach."

The down side to his view of Whitefield was that the preacher advocated slavery, as Jonathan Miller (the current American International Church community minister) said at the opening of the exhibition.

A short play, by Mervyn Weir (who also designed the exhibition), imagining how Equiano dealt with the church's collusion with slavery was performed. He thought that the biblical text of "Do unto all men as you would they unto you" destroyed all arguments supporting slavery.

Especially the use of iron muzzles, thumb screws and forcing slaves to flog their own wives, as described by Burt Caesar.

There were also poems about the harrowing accounts of the brutality of slavery recited by poet Nairobi Thompson, and music by violinist Keiron Stephen.

The exhibition consisted of quotations from Equiano's memoirs with illustrations (reproduced here courtesy of The Equiano Society).

It shows how he was kidnapped and enslaved, aged 11, from his Igbo village in Africa [now part of Nigeria], taken by canoe to the coast, then bound beneath a ship's deck and taken to Barbados, Virginia, then to England. As an enslaved teenager he had fought for Britain in the Royal Navy during the Seven Year War (1756-63).

He described his kidnapping: "One day, when all our people were gone out to their work as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both, and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths, and ran off with us into the nearest wood."

It took six or seven months to reach the coast and on to a ship that was so hot and overcrowded it almost suffocated the slaves. "This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers... The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable."

On landing in Barbados they were scrutinised like cattle by planters buying slaves on board. "They put us in separate parcels, and examined us attentively..."

Later, in Virginia, he was bought by a sea captain from his master for £30 or £40. "He meant me for a present to some of his friends in England."

Of a sea battle he fought during the Seven Years War he wrote: "The engagement now commenced with great fury on both sides: the Ocean immediately returned our fire, and we continued engaged with each other for some time, during which I was frequently stunned with the thundering of the great guns, whose dreadful contents hurried many of my companions into awful eternity.

"At last the French line was entirely broken, and we obtained the victory, which was immediately proclaimed with loud huzzas and acclamations."

He was finally relieved of his slavery ("manumission day") in Georgia and made a freeman, which he celebrated at a dance. The government planned to send Africans to Sierra Leone, but his heart was fixed on getting to London, which he finally achieved.

As an abolitionist campaigner he declared: "Tortures, murder, and every imaginable barbarity and inequity, are practised upon the poor slaves with impunity. I hope the slave trade will be abolished. I pray it may be an event at hand."

More information is on the web (equiano.uk)

<https://news.fitzrovia.org.uk/2019/08/06/exhibition-of-equianos-life-leading-black-campaigner-for-the-abolition-of-the-transatlantic-slave-trade/>