

IGNATIUS SANCHO: an African in 18th century London

Which choices would you make?



LONDON, SUGAR & SLAVERY
REVEALING OUR CITY'S UNTOLD HISTORY

Meet Ignatius Sancho

"I am one of those people whom the vulgar and illiberal call "Negurs."

Ignatius Sancho, 1766



As a child Ignatius Sancho was brought to London to serve as an uneducated slave. By the time of his death, Sancho was a 'free' African living as a respected member of London society: an intelligent, witty and popular writer of many letters to correspondents and newspapers; who condemned slavery as a crime against humanity – and encouraged others to spread this view. His incredible journey from enslavement to freedom, as a 'man of letters,' helps us to understand some of the difficult decisions that Africans in 18th century London had to make in order survive.

*Image: Ignatius Sancho portrait,
© National Gallery of Canada*

Wealth in 18th century London

"The first part of my life was rather unlucky, as I was placed in a family who judged ignorance the best and only security for obedience..."

Ignatius Sancho, 1766



The British slave trade is generating huge fortunes for the aristocracy, plantation-owners, merchants and traders. To display their wealth and status, many of these households, buy a 'human pet': a young African boy or girl to display in fine clothes and a metal collar of silver or brass, as a fashion accessory – the ultimate in 18th century 'bling'.

Image: *A Harlot's Progress - Plate 2: 1732, © Museum of London. The boy's silver collar affirms his status as a slave.*

The Beginning of Sancho's Story

As a young child, Ignatius Sancho is brought to London to be the pet (*slave*) of three sisters in Greenwich. To keep him obedient, the b is treated badly, and refused any education.

The Duke of Montagu is an occasional visitor to the sisters' house. A former soldier, he fought the French in the slave colonies of the West Indies, and these other experiences have caused him that Africans are the equals of Europeans. Duke takes pity on Sancho, and lends him books so that he can educate himself.



Image: *The Lady Frances and the Lady Catherine Jones Daughters to the Right Hon:ble Richard Earle of Ranelagh, 17th century, © Museum of London*

Dilemma One

You are Sancho. You're desperate to escape the sisters' cruel treatment. But you are an African child alone in London – what do you do?

Option 1: Be patient, the sisters' cruelty is bound to stop.

Option 2: Go on strike.

Option 3: Run away.



Be patient, the sisters' cruelty is bound to stop.

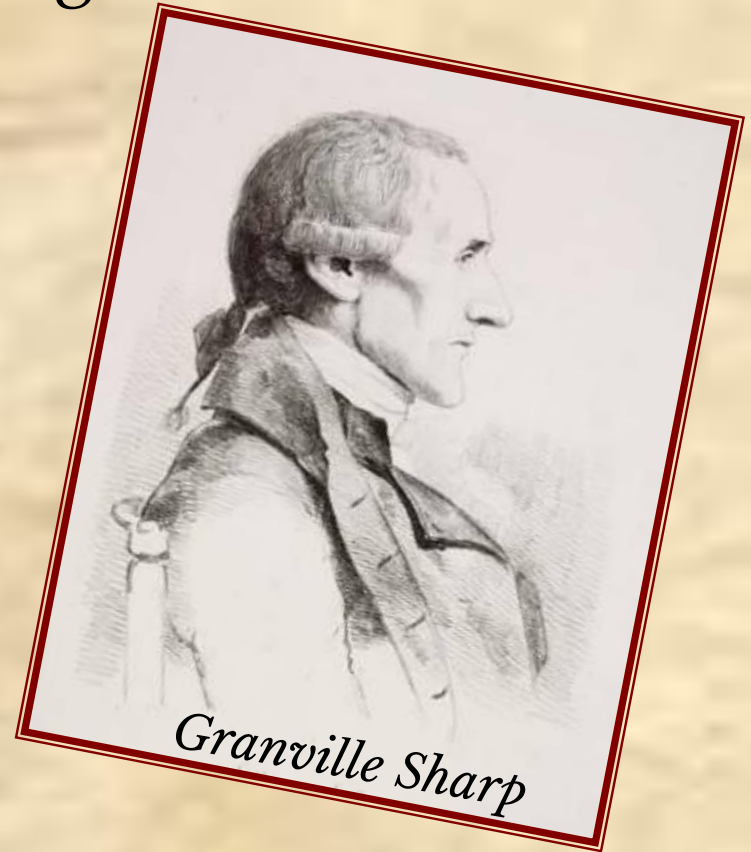
There's no guarantee your situation will improve. The sisters own you. The law says, as their property, they can treat you as they please. They even have the right to sell you to be worked to death as a plantation-slave in the West Indies.



WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED? ►

Go on strike.

You are a slave you have no rights. The sisters can have you beaten half to death as in the case of Jonathan Strong (1765) – an enslaved African whose injuries shock wealthy civil servant, Granville Sharp into becoming a leading member of the anti-slavery movement.



WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED? ►

Image: Granville Sharp, 1809, © Museum of London

Run away.

Ignatius Sancho escapes from the sisters' house, and makes his way to the Duke of Montagu's home. He is allowed to stay, given a job, treated well, and allowed to educate himself.



The Duke's behaviour towards Sancho is not unique. In another display of his belief that Africans could equal Europeans, the Duke invites Francis Williams, son of Free Africans in Jamaica, to London to study at grammar school and the University of Cambridge.

By the time of Ignatius Sancho's death in the 1780s approximately 15,000 people of African origin are living in Britain, the majority of them in London. Many have run away to make their homes in poorer parts of the city. Ignatius Sancho is one of a lucky few, able to earn a living and enjoy a comfortable social life among London's middle classes.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? ►

Sancho the Runaway

“The latter part of my life has been – thro’ God’s blessing, truly fortunate, having spent it in the service of one of the best families in the kingdom....”

Ignatius Sancho, 1766

By escaping from his owners, the young Ignatius Sancho becomes a ‘runaway’. Without the powerful protection of the Duke of Montagu, he can be hunted - his description in the newspapers; a reward offered for his capture and return. When the Duke dies, Sancho’s security and comfort is assured with an offer to remain in the Montagu household as butler to the Duke’s widow.

Africans in London

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Ignatius Sancho, 1766

Most people of African origin who live in London during the 1700s are not as fortunate as Sancho. Many settle in poor working class areas like the East End and Docklands. They work as road-sweepers, porters, 'chairmen', basket women, hawkers, beggars, prostitutes, thieves. There are lots of 'runaways' among them: African men, women and children who need to find somewhere to live, money to live on, someone to remove the fancy metal collars from their necks – someone who won't turn informer to collect reward money.



Image: Charles M'Gee, roadsweeper. From 'Vagabondiana' by John Thomas Smith, 1697, © Museum of London

Dilemma Two



You are Sancho. You believe slavery, the sisters' legal right to own you and treat you as they did, is wrong. You want to hit back in some way, but are you prepared to risk upsetting the Duke of Montagu and his wife? In them you have important friends, safety, a comfortable home, and good prospects for the future - what do you do?

Option 1: Get your revenge on the sisters who owned you in Greenwich by using your knowledge of their house to break in and rob them.

Option 2: Use your writing skills to encourage influential people to work against slavery.

Get your revenge on the sisters.

At law courts like the Old Bailey, records of criminal proceedings give plenty of evidence of Africans who try housebreaking as a means to survive, and get caught.



Image: New Sessions House, Old Bailey, c. 1740, © Corporation of London Libraries & Guildhall Art Library

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED? ►

Use your writing skills.

"I think you will forgive me for beseeching you to give one half hour's attention to slavery, as it is at this day practised in our West Indies – That subject handled in your striking manner, would ease the yoke (perhaps) of many... you who are universally read, and as universally admired..."

Letters like this one, written to author Laurence Sterne, in 1766, earn Sancho respect, they build support for anti-slavery work, and the Montagu's are not offended.

Extract from Sterne's reply to Sancho's letter:

"If I can weave the Tale I have wrote into the work I'm [about] – tis at the service of the afflicted – and a much greater matter, for in serious truth, it casts a sad Shade upon the World, That so great a part of it are and have been so long bound in chains of darkness & in Chains of Misery: & I cannot but both respect and felicitate You, that by so much laudable diligence you have broke the one - & that be falling into the hands of so good and merciful a family, Providence has rescued you from the other..." Laurence Sterne, 27th July 1766

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? ►

Sancho's Independence

"I say it is with reluctance, that I must observe your country's conduct has been uniformly wicked in the East – West Indies – and even on the coast of Guinea... It is a subject that sours my blood..."

Ignatius Sancho, 1787

Most of the African men and women working as house servants in London remain out of sight – 'below-stairs'. But Sancho is highly visible, the African butler to a wealthy family of British aristocrats.



Image: *The Fruits of Early Industry & Oeconomy*, 1789, © Museum of London

Sancho's Independence

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Ignatius Sancho, 1787

When the Duchess dies, Sancho works for her son-in-law, George, the new Duke of Montagu. George operates in a social circle where many consider the slave trade a necessary part of Britain's economy and global strength - to Sancho he is more than a boss, he is a 'protector' and 'friend'.

It's as George's butler that Sancho begins to write poetry and compose music. George helps him find a way to support his family when Sancho wants to leave his job to make an independent living as a businessman, as a grocer's shop in Westminster.

Dilemma Three

“ We drank tea with Sancho and his black lady, who was seated, when we entered, in the corner of the shop, chopping sugar, surrounded by her little Sanchonets... ”

J.T. Smith, 'Nolleckens and His Times' 1828



You are Ignatius Sancho. The location of your shop guarantees wealthy and important customers. You know that by selling sugar, rum, tobacco and coffee you are profiting from the slave trade. But you have a wife and six children to support – what do you do?

Option 1: Sell other goods and cut slave-grown items from your product range.

Option 2: Sell the shop and find something else to do.

Option 3: Sell slave-grown products because you need to earn a living.

*Image: Sugar Bowl, 1825,
© Museum of London*

Sell other goods & cut slave-grown products.



Slaves and the goods they produce are the foundation of Britain's economy. So strong is the demand for slave-grown products, if you cut these items from your goods on sale, your customers will buy them somewhere else. Without customers and sales, your business will fail.

*Image: Rum barrel and
sugar loaf mould ©
Museum of London*

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED? ►

Sell the shop and find something else to do.

Life in London is a grim for the majority of Africans, but London is the only home you have ever known. You have too much to lose: security, a comfortable living, admiration and respect.



Image: Disabled black man sells potted plants, 19th century, © Museum of London

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED? ►

Sell slave-grown products because you need to earn a living.

Sancho kept up his anti-slavery campaigning through his writing, until the last year of his life. But he also advertised his shop with a trade card - illustrated with a hogshead, an American Indian smoking a pipe, and an African slave - to show that he sold rum, tobacco and sugar.



*Image: Ignatius Sancho's trade card 1772-1780, © V&A
Images/Victoria and Albert museum, London*

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT? ►

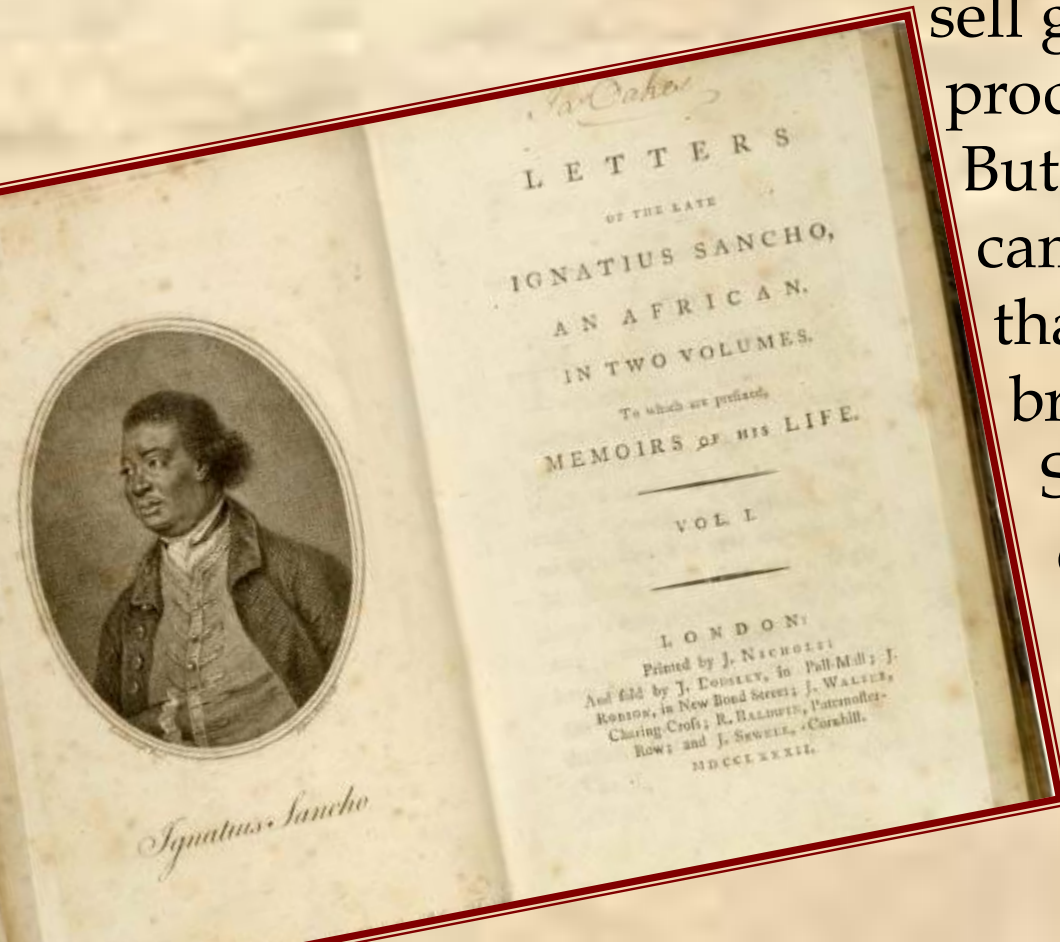
Sancho's Legacy

Ignatius Sancho died at his home in Charles Street, in 1780. As a former slave, he probably found it difficult to

sell goods that had been produced by slave labour.

But when the abolition campaign needed to show that Africans were not brutes or possessions,

Sancho's letters provided evidence that Africans were fellow human beings capable of intelligence and creativity – and worthy of respect.



Further Reading & Resources



Ignatius Sancho: African Man of Letters

www.brycchancarey.com/sancho/

London, Sugar & Slavery web resources

<http://www.museumindocklands.org.uk/English/EventsExhibitions/Special/LSS/Gallery/>

The African Community in London

<http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/English/Collections/OnlineResources/RWWC/Themes/1078/>

Black Presence: Asian and Black History in Britain, 1500-1850

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/index.htm>

Understanding Slavery: Citizenship

<http://www.understandingslavery.com/citizen/>

Young Runaway Slaves - V & A Museum of Childhood

www.vam.ac.uk/moc/whats_on/exhibitions/young_runaway_slaves/index.html

The Proceedings of the Old Bailey - The Black Communities of London

www.oldbaileyonline.org/history/communities/black.html