Early this year when the Church of England formally apologised for its part in the slave trade, many did not know what exactly the Church had done during that despicable era. Now we know, thanks to the meticulous research by Adam Hochschild. “The Caribbean was a slaughterhouse,” he informs us. This extract is from his book, *Bury the Chains - The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery*, recently issued in paperback.

**Black History Month**

**Slavery**

How the Church of England treated its slaves

The island of Barbados was one of the earliest British colonies in the Caribbean and the first to grow sugar. Its plantations pioneered various techniques soon applied elsewhere. We have a detailed picture of slave life there because Barbados, as it happens, was home to an estate that left unusually abundant records, the seaside Codrington plantation.

The land at Codrington totalled 700 acres. The rich red soil and plentiful rain produced a first-rate crop of sugar. Like many West Indian plantations – and unlike most of those in the American South – Codrington had absentee owners in England.

In a good year, Codrington’s profits were more than £2,000 – roughly $325,000 in today’s money. The plantation’s accountants kept a detailed inventory of all its assets, including the slaves. A headcount in 1781 showed the slave quarters holding 276 men, women and children.

Skilled male workers such as the carpenters, the boiler mechanic and three barrel-makers were valued on the books at £70 apiece, the two children’s nurses at only £15 each. Even the names given to the slaves reflected their jobs. Sloop Johnny, Cuffy Porter, Quashey Hog, Quashey Boyler.

At Codrington, as throughout the Caribbean, new slaves from Africa were first “seasoned” for three years, receiving extra food and light work assignments. Slaves were vulnerable during this early traumatic period, when they were most liable to die of disease, to run away, or to commit suicide.

The ordeal of the Middle Passage, plus the shock of adjusting to new lives, foods and diseases, was so great that roughly one-third of Africans died within three years of disembarking in the West Indies. This merely increased the demand for slaves. If you survived those three years, you were regarded as ready for the harshest labour.

Almost all the skilled jobs done by the
ing cane juice into sugar and molasses, and a distillery for making molasses into rum. The mill rollers had no brakes and sometimes the hatchet did not help.

A planter described one incident in Barbados. "Two negro women, being chained together by way of punishment for some offence, were employed ... in a windmill, one of them unfortunately reaching too near the rollers, her fingers were caught between them, and her body were thrown through the mill. The iron

and a straitjacket.

"It's too notoriously known here how ready negroes in general are to join in any wicked design," wrote one manager at Codrington. But no "wicked design" ever actually stopped work on the plantation, but its managers, like apprehensive whites on every Caribbean island, always felt that they were at the edge of a cliff.

Just a few days' sail away, for instance, authorities on Antigua discovered in 1736 that slaves were plotting to plant gunpowder at the site of a grand ball "to blow up all the gentry of the island while they were in the height of their mirth", following which groups of slaves "were to enter the town at different parts and to put all the white people there to the sword". Once the plot was uncovered, 77 slaves were burned to death.

The life of even the most obedient Codrington slave was likely to be short. Careful clerks recorded slave deaths each year, on the same list with those of cattle, hogs and horses. Causes included "ulcers", "suddenly", "a flux", "shot by accident", "a fever", "plague", "debilitated", "convulsed", "leprosy". In 1743, "three negro men, Anning, Yeaboy and Brimiiah were suffocated to death by the steam of a receiving cistern in the distill house."

Caribbean slavery, was, by every measure, far more deadly than slavery in the American South. This was not because Southern managers were the kind and gentle ones of Gone With the Wind, but because cultivating sugar cane by hand was — and still is — one of the hardest ways of life on earth. Almost everywhere in the Americas where slaves were working other than on sugar plantations, they lived longer.

Besides planting the cane, they had to fertilise the soil with cattle manure which they carried to the fields on their heads in dripping 80-pound baskets. The most intense work came during the high-pressure five-month harvesting and processing season.

The sugar regime was not the only burden. The West Indian climate brought a raft of tropical diseases to both whites and blacks. And with the best arable land on the islands all reserved for cash crops like sugar, the Caribbean slave diet was far worse than that on the North American mainland, causing nutrition deficiency like rickets and scurvy.
Because of the early deaths from disease and the extraordinarily low birth-rate, Caribbean masters depended, far more than planters in the American South, on a constant flow of new slaves. Without this influx of fresh human cargo, the slave population of the West Indies would have fallen by as much as 3% a year.

For most of the 1700s, Codrington's managers regularly bought up to 30 slaves a year off ships arriving from Africa. Plantation owners generally felt, as the saying went, that it was cheaper to buy than to breed. An Antigua planter who bought some slaves from John Newton, the British slave captain who later "repented" and wrote many hymns, including Amazing Grace, told him that his policy was "with little relaxation, hard fare, and hard usage, to wear them out before they became useless, and unable to do service; and then, to buy new ones, to fill up their places".

One final set of grim numbers underlines the way slaves on sugar plantations like Codrington were systematically worked to an early death. When slavery ended in the United States, less than half a million slaves imported over the centuries left a surviving slave population of nearly four million. When slavery ended in the British West Indies, total slave imports of well over two million left a surviving slave population of about 670,000. More than twice as many slaves were shipped to the island of Jamaica alone than to all 13 North American colonies, later states, combined. The Caribbean was a slaughterhouse.

Codrington's richly detailed records not only portray how a West Indian plantation operated, they also show how the benefits of slavery were enjoyed by the highest reaches of British society - the absentee owner for whom the accounts were prepared was not a person, and it was not a family. It was the Church of England.

Surely this proceeds from some defect, both of humanity and even of good policy. But we must take things as they are at present."

For Evangelicals who detested the ways of the Church of England, England was a nation that had lost its moral bearings. Philosophers were too tempted by scepticism, consumption of alcohol was too high, and women's necklines were too low. Everyone, including the clergy, seemed to be carousing in taverns, begetting illegal children, and forgetting God. The great man of letters, Samuel Johnson, joked to his biographer James Boswell that he had never seen a clergyman who was religious.

Many Evangelical leaders were middle or upper class, and they were especially alarmed at this sinful behaviour. Since the Reformation, Britain's official or "established" church had been the Church of England to which the great majority of the population belonged, especially if they were prominent families.

Catholics and Jews had few civil rights and could not vote - in fact at the time 19 out of every 20 Englishmen and all Englishwomen were not allowed to vote - and even Protestants of other denominations could not serve as army officers, hold municipal office, or be members of parliament. To do any of these things, you had to at least go through the motions of following Anglican, or Church of England, ritual.

Gin ravaged London the way the crack cocaine epidemic hit American inner cities in the late 1980s, until legislation, backed fervently by Evangelicals, abated the "gin craze". The upper classes, however, continued unimpeded to consume vast quantities of their own favourite drink: claret. Based on daily habit, people were known as two-, three-, or four-bottle men. Cabinet members, including William Pitt, prime minister for many years starting in 1783, sometimes showed up drunk in parliament.

One of the first times John Newton had heard an Evangelical minister preach was when he was delivering slaves to South Carolina. On a later journey, while unloading slaves at St Kitts, he met an Evangelically-minded fellow captain and "for nearly a month we spent every evening together on board each other's ship alternately and often prolonged our visits till towards daybreak".

A strange scene to imagine, the two captains in their tricorneted hats pacing the deck, earnestly talking of God and sin through the night, while slaves lie in shackles below them.

A well-known modern author of inspirational books tells the tale of John Newton

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investment that ended only when Manesty went bankrupt.

Newton continued to socialise happily with old slave ship captain friends at their favourite London gathering place, the Jamaica Coffee House, and he owed his position as curate of Olney to an influential slave trade supporter, the Earl of Dartmouth.

In 1781, more than a quarter of a century after he left the slave trade, Newton preached a sermon summing up all of Britain's sins - for which he believed the American Revolution and a chain of disastrous hurricanes in the West Indies were God's punishment. These ranged from adultery to "the magnitude of the national debt" to blasphemy, "which perhaps may eminently be styled Our national sin".

Slavery did not make the list. Not until years later, when forces burst into life around him that made it impossible for him to remain silent, would he finally speak about it.

Enter Thomas Clarkson and his friends [Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, William Wilberforce and the Quakers were the great abolitionists of the time who had been working tirelessly for years to abolish the slave trade. Africans have a lot to thank them for]. But eager as they were to mobilise witnesses against the trade, Clarkson and his colleagues had strikingly little interest in the testimony of any of the thousands of former slaves in Britain, some with whip scars on their backs.

There are no records of any of them appearing on speakers' platforms with abolitionists at this time, and the Abolition Committee made no effort to record their stories, although Clarkson, James Ramsey and Granville Sharp all knew a number of ex-slaves in London.

The abolitionist attitude towards blacks was perhaps summed up best by Josiah Wedgewood's design [of the abolitionist's logo]. Wedgewood, porter to the Queen, was a famous pottery designer and manufacturer. He asked one of his craftsmen to design a seal for stamping the wax used to close envelopes. It showed a kneeling African in chains, lifting his hands beseechingly, encircled by the words: "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?". Reproduced everywhere from books and leaflets to snuffboxes and cufflinks, the image was an instant hit.

Wedgewood's kneeling African, the equivalent of the lapel buttons we wear for electoral campaigns today, was probably the first widespread use of a logo designed for a political cause. But there was a problem. The African may have been "a man and a brother", but he was definitely a younger and grateful brother, a kneeling one, not a rebellious one. At a time when members of the British upper class did not kneel even for prayer in church, the image of the pleading slave victim reflected a crusade whose leaders saw themselves as uplifting the downtrodden, not fighting for equal rights for all.

To our eyes, it is curious to see an instinctive democrat like Clarkson, with his burning outrage against injustice, as part of a movement whose rhetoric was so paternalistic. But the Abolition Committee's campaign was ultimately aimed at one target: Parliament. The upper class Britons comprising that body might be moved by pity, but certainly not by a passion for equality.

Whites who had lived in the West Indies, on the other hand, knew exactly what they thought: they regarded slaves as cattle breeders might their animals, discussing whether Igbo were more unruly than Coromantees [Ghanaians], Congos stronger field hands than Krunien. Edward Long, a Jamaican planter and historian of the island, spoke of blacks as subhuman, no better than apes or oxen, and, like many a race theorist to come, was particularly aghast at sex between black men and white women: "The lower classes of women in England, are remarkably fond of the blacks, for reasons too brutal to mention; they would connect themselves with horses and asses, if the laws permitted them."

Although not similarly bothered about interracial sex, even Clarkson believed that blacks bred more rapidly than whites, being as he put it, "peculiarly prolific in their nature".

In the end, the number of local anti-slavery groups around the country soared to more than 1,200. Quakers were still crucial, but they were joined by Britain's fast growing ranks of Methodists - a denomination far more democratic and egalitarian than the country's "official church" and slave owner, the Church of England.