Breaking The Chains
A walking trail exploring Dundee’s connections to slavery

As a major trading port, Dundee was inevitably drawn into the transatlantic slave trade. Dundee merchants and shipowners were quick to realise the profits that could be made in Africa and the Fraternity of Masters and Seamen were among those who invested in the Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies, set up in 1661 (later to become the ill-fated Darien Company). Soon after the Act of Union in 1707, Dundee merchants were among many in Scotland petitioning Parliament to complain about a proposed monopoly by the English Royal African Company. The town’s growing linen industry gave it a valuable commodity to trade with, and Dundee linen (particularly a coarse cloth called “warsash”) was bought in huge quantities by slaveowners in the West Indies and the United States of America.

Dundee therefore had little interest in opposing the transatlantic slave trade and it was not until 1832 (a year before the trade was abolished) that the First Anti-Slavery Society was formed here. After abolition the focus shifted to the US. While Dundee merchants continued to profit by selling linen to American slaveowners, anti-slavery campaigners staged an increasingly vocal campaign in the town, and many previously enslaved people were invited to Dundee to speak about their experiences. This city centre trail presents just some of Dundee’s many connections to 18th and 19th-century slavery. There are many other places outside the city centre, from streets named after slave owners (such as Tullideph Place) to major institutions and amenities built or purchased using wealth derived from slavery (such as Royal Victoria Hospital and Biddick Hill).

You can find out more at:
www.leisureandculturedundee.com/slaverymap

Please note: This trail is step-free but involves some uneven surfaces. There are also some busy roads to cross so please take care and be aware of your surroundings. Some parts of the route are not well-lit at night so we recommend undertaking this only in daylight.


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6 Overgate Centre, by the Mercat Cross

Here was the site of St John’s Wynd Chapel, run for over 40 years by Rev George Gillison. In the mid-18th century this was Dundee’s most notable centre for anti-slavery campaigning. It hosted a meeting of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in 1831 from the US including the previously enslaved Frederick Douglass (see no 19) and Samuel Ward, of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

7 Steeple Church

This building was formerly Bell Street UP Church. The large hall in its 19th century heyday was a regular meeting place for the Dundee Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Association, a popular organisation in the 1850s.

8 Giffittan Memorial Church

Built in 1837, this was the building home to Rev George Gillison, who had died in 1835. He and his wife were Dundee’s most active campaigners against American slavery. The memorial building at the tower end of the church was inspired by a trip to America in 1847, published The Debasing and Demoralising Influence of Slavery.

18 The Howff

On entering the Howff from Meadowside looking diagonally to your right is the family tomb of the Wedderburns. On the ground below this is the chapel where Rev William Borwick and his wife. Borwick was minister of the Church of Scotland’s first anti-slavery congregation and when Lincoln was elected President in 1861, he appointed Smith to be US Consul in Scotland. Smith took up residence in Dundee and fulfilled this role throughout the American Civil War and other Lincoln’s assassination. Lincoln’s views on race were now complex, but he is celebrated for having the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and approved the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, leading to the abolition of slavery in the US.

19 1A West Boll Street

This building was formerly Bell Street U.P. Church. The large hall in its basement was the location in 1850 of one of the most celebrated speeches by Frederick Douglass, who had previously enslaved in the US. It became the headquarters of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in 1832, and this led to its becoming Dundee’s most important site for slavers forces enslaved, with its controversial north door facing directly onto the Howff.

20 Abertay University

This was originally founded in 1888 as Dundee Technical College and one of the most famous lecturers here was John Stuart Mill. This lead to its becoming Abertay University in 1992.

21 Corner of Bell Street & Victoria Road

The India Buildings were once the headquarters of the insurance company J C Smith & Co, owned by anti-slavery campaigner J C Smith. An elder of St Davids Free Church (see no 2), his son was the celebrated writer Beatrix Potter. Potter (see no 22) wrote her own anti-slavery stories for children such as the African Queen.

22 Corner of Bell Street & Meadowside

On the south corner was the site of St Andrew’s Free Church, where Rev James Ewing was minister. Ewing also hosted anti-slavery meetings in his church in the 1850s. The church was in honour of the American abolitionist George Cheever near by on the opposite side was the home of Rev William Bennet and his wife. Bennet was minister of the Bell Street U.P Church in 1846 and his son was an elder of Rev William Bennet and his wife. Bennet was minister of the Bell Street U.P Church in 1846. His son was one of the most famous lecturers here as John Stuart Mill.

23 Chamber Building (now Chamber East)

Opened in 1856, this building was originally the Royal Exchange and was named after Charles, 2nd Earl Grey, who was Prime Minister from 1830-41. It was once the home of Alfred Deakin, later Prime Minister of Australia. It was also built in 1832, a chapter house for an earlier mill, Chapelshade, which produced linen for the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.

24 Statue of Queen Victoria

The British Royal Family profited from and protected the trade in enslaved people until the 19th century. Labour from enslaved people was the mainstay of the British Empire. Victoria took the throne soon after the trade in enslaved people had been outlawed in all of the British Empire and was actively involved in British relations with Africa during this time. She became a patron of the Queen’s Slavery Abolition Act 1833 and returned to the striped gown to protest against the slave trade. She became a great-grandmother to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg, who took a personal interest in her upbringing and education.

25 Statue of George Kinloch

Celebrated as Dundee’s first radical MP and a champion of political reform, Kinloch inherited a plantation in Jamaica from his father, who died in 1776. Kinloch graduated in 1811 and was managed by Sir John Wedderburn (see no 19) until George came of age and over the next five years he contributed to the abolition of slavery in the US. He also visited the plantation but his health benefited from it. In 1826 he signed the petition to the Slavery Abolition Act 1807 in favour of a constitutional life style role in the slave trade.

14 The Shaw, 15 Shore Terrace

This building was originally the Exchange Coffee House, built in 1828–29. Located close to the docks, it featured an extensive billiard room. In 1860 the building was leased to Rev George Gilfillan.

15 96 High Street (now Optical Express)

In 1824, after meeting in smaller premises at the Baltic Coffee House and becoming home to Dundee Chamber of Commerce, who had previously met in smaller premises at the Baltic Coffee House, built in 1824–25. It was also on an early meeting place for the Forsyth Chamber of Commerce, formed in 1829 to protect the interests of local merchants.

16 41 Reform Street

This building was home to the Robertson family, who ran for over 40 years by Rev George Gillison.

17 60–64 Reform Street

The building was the original meeting place of the Dundee Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Association. This was formed following the Church School Wynd Chapel by members of the Dundee Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Association in 1851. The Rev George Gillison’s wife Margaret was elected President. The most high profile arrest was a grand festival in honour of the lecturer Harriet Beecher Stowe (see no 9). But they also raised funds to support anti-slavery organisations in the USA and to help fugitive slaves in Canada.

18 Edinburgh agreed that “the state of slavery is not recognised
by anti-slavery campaigner J C Smith. An elder
of St Davids Free Church (see no 2), his son was
the celebrated writer Beatrix Potter.

Frederick Douglass also spoke at several
organisations in the 1850s.

21 Corner of Bell Street & Victoria Road

The India Buildings were once the headquarters of the insurance company J C Smith & Co, owned by anti-slavery campaigner J C Smith. An elder of St Davids Free Church (see no 2), he seems to have inspired Beatrix Potter. Potter (see no 22) wrote her own anti-slavery stories for children such as the African Queen.

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