

ABOLITION

The Act

The Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was passed on 25 March 1807, declaring that from the 1 May 1807 'all manner of dealing and reading in the purchase, sale, barter, or transfer of slaves or of persons intending to be sold, transferred, used, or dealt with as slaves, practiced or carried in, at, or from any part of the coast or countries of Africa shall be abolished, prohibited and declared to be unlawful'.

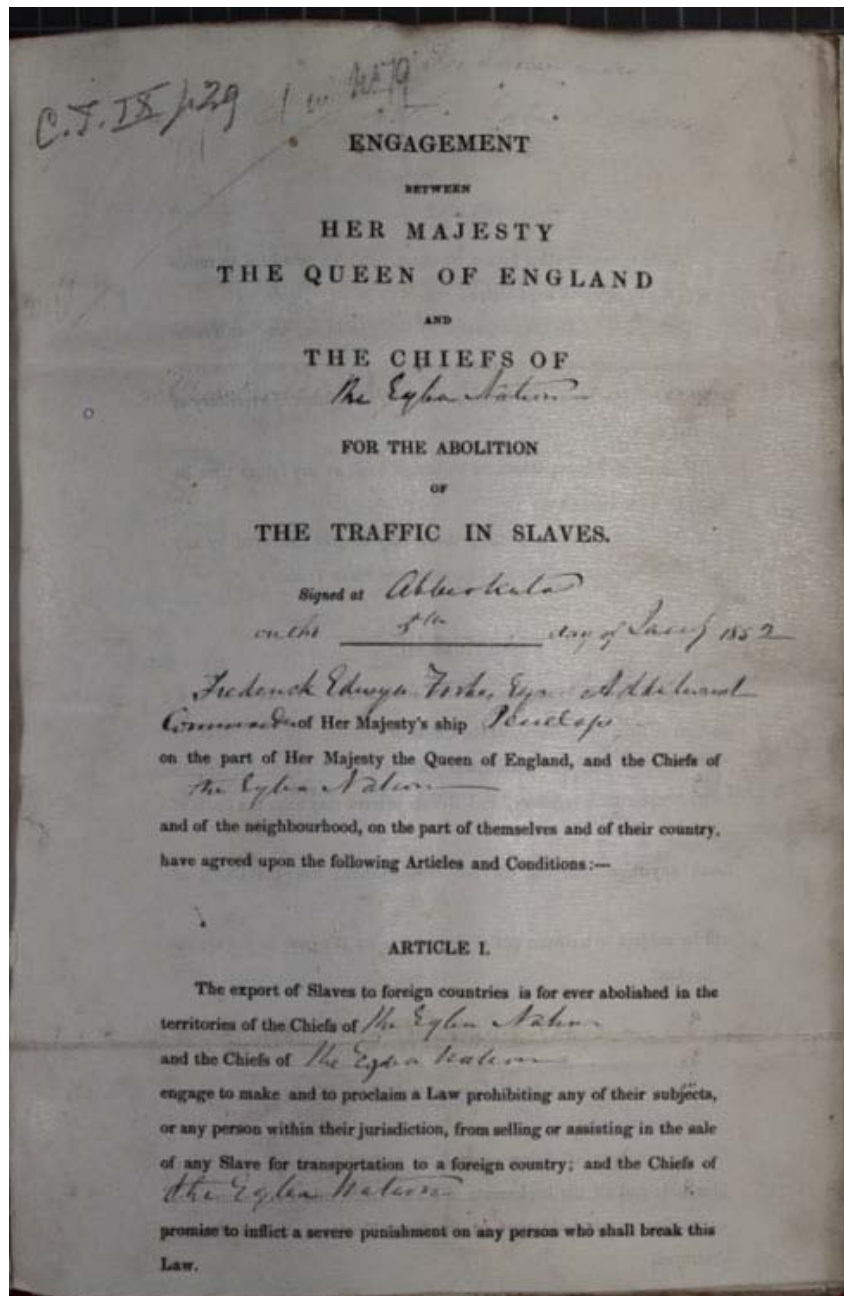
The main provisions of the Act were that:

- Any ships found to be involved in the slave trade were liable to be seized and condemned. The master and owner were liable to be fined £100 per slave and the ships and goods forfeited to the Crown. Bounty or head money was paid to the captors of illegal vessels. The bounty was £30 for every man and woman and £10 for children under 14 delivered to the appropriate authorities.
- Africans 'freed' from the illegal slavers were not free to do as they wished. Instead, men were enlisted into the Army, Navy or Royal Marines - to 'be considered, treated, and dealt with in all respects as if he had voluntarily so enlisted or entered himself'. Women, children and those not suitable for 'enlistment' were bound as apprentices to land owners, the military and local government, as labourers and domestics.

Policing the Act

Under an 1817 treaty with Spain to abolish the slave trade, naval ships and other officials of both nations could seize any Spanish or British ships believed to be involved in the illegal trade in slaves, the masters and owners of which were then tried at mixed commission courts. There were later treaties with Portugal and the Netherlands.

These treaties did not always abolish the trade in slaves. For example, the treaty with Portugal allowed the trade to continue from ports south of the Equator and the ship had to be issued with a passport to trade. Also, it did not prevent other countries, especially America and France, from trading and it was not uncommon for Dutch and Spanish ships to trade under the French flag.



Engagement between Her Majesty the Queen of England and the Chiefs of the Egba Nation for the Abolition of the Traffic in Slaves', 1822, catalogue reference: FO 93/6/7

Liberated Africans

Liberated Africans were African, American and Caribbean slaves who were found onboard illegal slavers and freed by the courts.

However, they were not freed in the sense that they could go and do what they chose. They were not sent back to their countries of origin as it was considered likely that they would be re-enslaved.

Although 'liberated', they were not technically free: able-bodied men were 'enlisted' into the military services particularly the army for unlimited service. They were not entitled to the full benefits of pensions when discharged as unfit for further service or after 21 years. Women and children were often apprenticed to local landowners, to the military and to the local government for periods of up to 14 years.

Some of the smaller colonies with vice-Admiralty and mixed commission courts found that they could not cope with the numbers of liberated Africans and tried to transport them to other colonies. In 1828, the Spanish authorities passed a proclamation to move the liberated Africans in Cuba to other Spanish possessions including Spain. Spain also made an agreement with Britain to send some to British possessions, and many thousands were moved to British colonies especially Trinidad. From 1831, liberated Africans were also moved from Sierra Leone to the Gambia and to the Caribbean.

By the 1860s, the anti-slaving patrols off the West Coast of Africa and diplomatic pressures had ended the trans-Atlantic slave trade, with Cuba being the last American country to abolish slavery in 1869.

There was increasing concern about the unregulated slave trade from East Africa to the Middle East and to the islands in the Indian Ocean. Britain continued its efforts to abolishing this trade by moving its West African Squadron to the Persian Gulf.