

THE SLAVE-OWNERS OF BLOOMSBURY



Bloomsbury [3]

Introduction

This exhibition focuses on slave-owners in Bloomsbury to show that the area's past is not simply about literature and culture: it's also about exploitation and empire. However, just as colonists went out into the empire, so the empire returned to Britain in the form of a growing black population.

Parish registers reflect the black presence from as early as the 1500s. During the slavery era (c.1625–1833) many people mistakenly thought that a Christian baptism would make them free. James Ambrose, 'a negro man born in Kings Town Jamaica' appears in the baptism records of St Sepulchre in Holborn on 27 August 1742. He was not alone; many black people chose to live and work in the capital occupying a variety of professions – notably sailors but also entertainers like Billy Waters who is buried in the St Pancras New Cemetery. Some individuals have become well known – Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince and Samuel Coleridge Taylor.

This panel explores and celebrates the black presence in and around Bloomsbury.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912) 15 Theobald's Road

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was born on 15th August 1875 at 15 Theobald's Road, Holborn. His father was a surgeon from Sierra Leone who returned there when Samuel was very young, perhaps even before the birth of his son. Samuel was brought up in Croydon by his mother Alice Martin and won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music at the age of 15.

Coleridge-Taylor fought against racial prejudice to become a composer of international acclaim. He considered himself an Anglo-African and combined African traditional music with western Classical music. His best-known works are *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* (1898) and *Scenes from an Everyday Romance* (1900). He died of pneumonia in 1912 at the age of 37.



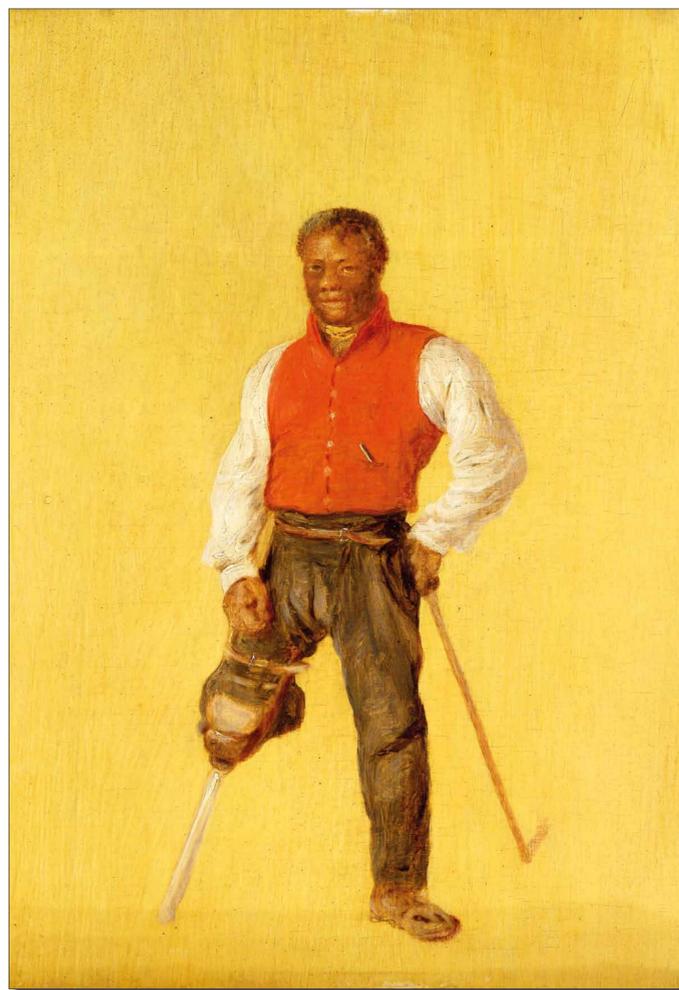
"A distinguished composer escaping from the autograph fiends." This caricature shows how Coleridge-Taylor's fame spread following the success of *Hiawatha* (1898). Unknown artist, © Royal College of Music, London.

Billy Waters (c. 1778–1823) Short's Gardens

Billy Waters was a sailor in the Royal Navy who served in North America. He may have been born into enslavement and then been manumitted but details of his early life are unclear. After losing his leg in an accident at sea, he moved to London where he was awarded a very small Naval pension.

He helped support his wife and two children by busking outside the Adelphi Theatre on the Strand. He became a well known entertainer, famous not only for this singing and violin-playing but also for his sailor hat and feathers and for his 'peculiar antics'.

He was elected King of the Beggars but when he fell ill in 1823 he entered the Bloomsbury workhouse on the corner of Endell Street and Short's Gardens. He died there ten days later and was buried in the cemetery at St Pancras New Church.

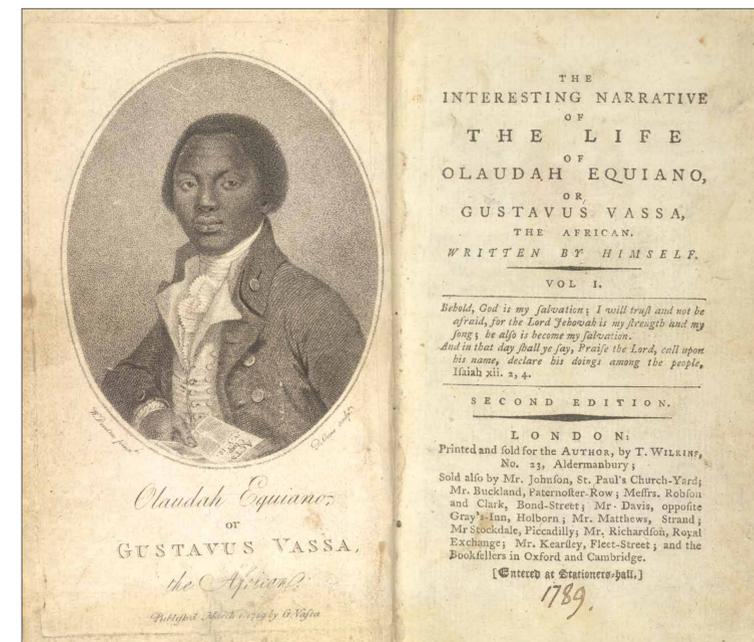


Billy Waters, sailor and musician. Painted in 1815, possibly by Sir David Wilkie. © National Maritime Museum.

Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745–1797) 53 Baldwin's Gardens

According to his own autobiography Equiano was born in 1745, an Igbo from what is now Nigeria. Enslaved as a child he was carried to Barbados and then to the British colony of Virginia. Eventually purchased by a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, Equiano took part in the Seven Years War. He was sent to England to be schooled and he converted to Christianity. After being transported to Montserrat he was eventually sold to a Quaker called Robert King who allowed Equiano to buy his freedom.

Realising the dangers he faced as a freed man in the Caribbean, Equiano travelled to London. Between 1787–1788 he lived at 53 Baldwin's Gardens, Holborn. As an educated ex-slave he was able to publically challenge the racist justification for slavery – that black people lacked humanity. In 1789 he published an account of his life *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. He is celebrated the world over as a key figure in the abolitionist movement.



Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* gives an account of his childhood in Africa, his enslavement in America and his struggle for freedom and independence. © The British Library Board (source: 1489.g.50).