Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Liverpool merchants controlled two-thirds of the British share—itself probably not less than one-half—of the trade which carried slaves from Africa to the Americas. Liverpool had gained this position by rapid expansion of its activities since 1740, during a period when the overall volume of the Atlantic slave trade was increasing. By the simplest test of economic efficiency, success, Liverpool's organisation of slave-trading was more efficient, and increasingly more efficient, than that of rival ports, in Britain or elsewhere. In an age when entrepreneurial efficiency was creating in Britain the world's first Industrial Revolution, it is hardly surprising that Liverpool merchants aimed at higher efficiency and aimed successfully; and it would be of interest to compare the efficiency dynamic of the Liverpool slave-traders with that of other groups of British traders, and with that of other entrepreneurial elements in the contemporary British economy. But it is doubtful whether the fragmentary business records which survive, or for that matter the sparse records which were all that contemporary businessmen thought it necessary or possible to make, would allow comparison in any detail. However, the records of the Liverpool slave trade, thin and scattered though they are, do allow a study to be made of certain aspects of the economic context in which efficiency was sought. The commercial history of a typical Liverpool slave voyage c. 1800 can be usefully analysed in terms of 'problem-solving'. What were the factors which controlled the economic outcome of a voyage, and in particular to what extent did these
involve problems which rational decision on the part of the merchants or their agents could solve, in the sense of producing the desired economic outcome? The records do not provide a full answer to these questions, for in general they fail to record either the totality of solutions of particular voyages, or the solutions to any specific problem of a sufficient proportion of voyages to be statistically significant. But they do make clear the number and nature of the problems, demonstrating the complexity of organisation and decision-making in a single slave voyage. This essay concentrates on two sets of problems, those that arose in Liverpool, before the departure and on return, and those that arose in West Africa during the trading activities. A third set of problems, those that arose in the West Indies, will only be considered in so far as they directly affected other issues. The essay deals with a period of great interest immediately before abolition; but since this period had its own marked characteristics (for instance, a predominance of war years) it should not be assumed that what was typical of the African voyage of 1790–1807 was typical, in all or perhaps most respects, of its earlier periods.

PROBLEMS IN LIVERPOOL

(a) Financing a voyage

In the later eighteenth century transport and communications problems encouraged the registration, ownership and management of a vessel within one port. Consequently Liverpool’s slave trade lay almost entirely in the hands of the town’s commercial community. Between 1788 and 1793, 98 per cent of the ships leaving Liverpool for Africa were owned within the port. The typical Liverpool slave-trader was a ‘general merchant’, whose trading was not limited to that provided by the slave trade, and whose shipowning activities were often incidental to his other interests. These could include buying and selling, importing, exporting, distribution and brokerage, in various commodities, in a number of overseas markets. The trade was not dominated by the small-scale grocer, tailor, etc., as has sometimes been suggested. On the contrary, in its final years the trade was controlled by a few large houses; for instance, seven firms accounted for 52 per cent of the slaving ventures between 1789 and 1791. But
since the merchant community had interconnected interests and any trade had many ramifications, most of Liverpool’s leading merchants and functionaries were at one time or another involved, directly or indirectly, in the slave trade. Even avowed opponents of the trade, such as the Rathbones, could allow returning slave-ships to freight West Indian produce on their behalf. William Roscoe, a notable advocate of abolition, was a banking partner of slave-trader Thomas Leyland.

From the moment a slave venture was suggested an entrepreneur had to choose between a complex series of alternatives. The success of the undertaking depended to a large extent on the merchant’s knowledge of the problems involved in African trade, and on his professional ability to solve them. The first essential decision related to the financing of the enterprise; should it be undertaken entirely by the entrepreneur, or by the formation of a partnership? Relatively slow returns on capital invested in the slave trade influenced merchants to put their money in a number of vessels with several associates, rather than in one vessel each. In 1790, for instance, 30 out of 58 ventures to Africa and the West Indies were organised by partnerships of more than four people. Financing voyages from within the port was facilitated by the availability of long-term credits, of up to eighteen months, particularly from Manchester manufacturers. Moreover, local banks provided extensive short-term loans to Liverpool slave-traders. In the 1780s firms such as T. and W. Earle, F. Ingram, J. France, J. Blackburne, G. Hodson, Earles and Molyneaux, Allanson and Barton, all had overdrawn accounts at Heywood’s Bank. It would appear to have been quite common for firms to finance new ventures through an extension of credit as well as from profits gained from previous voyages.

(b) Obtaining a vessel and cargo

After arriving at a formula for financing the voyage, a decision had to be taken concerning the purchase of a vessel. It was common for the merchant planning a venture, or one of his partners, to be also engaged in shipowning, and therefore a vessel might be provided from within the partnership. If the firm’s ships were already employed, the merchants might invest in additions to their capital stock. It was convenient to buy ships that were
constructed for the slave trade, but West Indiamen could be adapted with facility. In the last years of the slave trade it would seem to have been common for merchants to purchase vessels for a particular voyage. For instance, 71 per cent of the slave-ships leaving Liverpool for West Africa in 1798 had been registered since January 1797. Moreover, as many as 47 per cent were registered during 1798 itself, suggesting that these ships had been acquired specifically for a venture in that year. It is conceivable that some merchants had vessels built specifically for new ventures. However, only six of the 135 slave-ships departing from Liverpool in 1798 had been built since 1 January 1797. In contrast, no less than 34 of these ships had been captured from the enemy during 1797 and 1798. There would also appear to have been a fairly rapid turnover in the ownership of slave vessels. One-third of the ships sailing from Liverpool to West Africa in 1798 changed hands before 1802. This rapid turnover, taken together with the high losses at sea during war years, indicates that a large number of merchants, whether by choice or circumstance, retained an interest in a particular slave-ship for only a relatively short period; and the tendency in the 1790s was towards the early sale of older vessels and their replacement with newer stock, either from the construction yards or from naval courts.

Selection and provision of cargo might well be a complicated affair. Partners could be called on to settle specific debts for cargo with traders not involved in the enterprise; and they sometimes did this by the manipulation of their general trading budgets extrinsic to the slave voyage accounts. Moreover the nature of 'general trading' often allowed a slave-trader to include commodities for export to Africa which were acquired through an extension of his other interests, at primary or wholesale cost. The selection of cargo was also influenced by elaborate Customs regulations which had to be both observed and utilised. It was expedient at one time to use the Isle of Man and Ireland as entrepots for the collection of duty-free goods, particularly spirits. Special licences and securities had sometimes to be obtained for the export of certain items such as firearms and gunpowder. Other commodities might be given favourable customs treatment: for instance, Bombay 'arrangoes', a type of bead normally liable to be charged duty, could be packed and put
under seal in London and transported to Liverpool for re-export to Africa, duty-free, so long as they were shipped within a certain period of time. Merchants had to be well informed about these regulations, particularly when there was a prospect of war, since this might result in a ship being forced to remain in port longer than had been expected and thus beyond duty-free time-limits.

(c) Season of departure

Once the merchant had determined the degree of partnership required, the methods of financing, the availability of a suitable vessel, and the optimum selection of a cargo, and had obtained a captain, crew and perhaps insurance, the ship could sail for Africa. The timing of the departure from Liverpool was in some instances carefully regulated. It has been suggested that slave-traders visited West Africa during the dry season, defined as approximately between October and March, since the incidence of sickness amongst both crew and slave cargo inevitably increased when ships were loaded during the rainy season. If this proposition is accepted at its face value, then ships leaving Liverpool between February and July would be likely to operate in West Africa during the defined wet season and would consequently be taking uneconomic risks. In fact, the shipping information contained in the contemporary Liverpool press indicates that large numbers of vessels were leaving port at times of the year that were likely to lead to this alleged wet season trading. Four separate analyses have been made of all traced sailings to Africa from Liverpool, in the years 1791–4, 1798, 1799 and 1804–7. These show that between 48 per cent and 60 per cent of all slave-ships left Liverpool between February and July. This might indicate that the West African seasons had little or no influence on the time of the year ships left Liverpool, or alternatively that the earlier definition of the wet season underestimated the complexity of seasonal variations in West Africa.

In order to assess these alternatives a closer examination of the West African seasons becomes necessary. It is true that the coast from Sierra Leone to the Cameroons experiences more or less the same rainy season, with the heaviest rainfall between April and October. But to the south, in Angola, the pattern is reversed, with ports such as Mayumba and Luanda experiencing their wet
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season between October and April. Furthermore, the wide generalisations above are in some respects misleading. For instance, whereas during August an average of 35 inches of rain falls at Freetown, and 27 inches at Douala, only 2.5 inches falls at Lagos and 0.6 inches at Accra. Thus the implications for health of a ‘wet’ month may vary considerably from district to district. At Saint Louis, Accra and Luanda, some ‘wet’ months have lower rainfall and therefore better health prospects than some ‘dry’ months at Calabar and Douala. Of course exact information on rainfall was not available in the eighteenth century. But the pattern of numbers of ‘wet days’ in the month is very similar to that of total rainfall in the month; and ships’ captains regularly recorded in their logs wet and dry days. Thus it was possible for merchants to obtain information regarding the relative wetness of specific months at specific ports on the West African seaboard. There is no positive evidence that this information was accumulated and tabulated; but it is unlikely that what captains and agents knew about African weather was ignored by Liverpool merchants when making decisions on the timing of their voyages.

Just over half the vessels sailing from Liverpool to West Africa in 1798 left the port between February and July and thus were active in Africa during the alleged ‘wet season’. But 47 per cent of these vessels were destined for Angola and its neighbourhood, regions south of the equator enjoying their dry season during the months May to October; and a large part of the remainder were bound for districts such as the Gold Coast, where the worst excesses of the rainy season could be avoided. Thus, the owners may have been more aware of the variability of the coastal climate than they have been given credit for. That so many ships left Liverpool between February and July was partly the result of the growing value of the Angola market in the last years of the trade. Even vessels arriving in Angola during that part of the coast’s wet season were not necessarily taking uneconomic risks to health since the amount of rain falling there was sometimes less than that falling in the same month in other regions where it was a ‘dry’ month, for instance, in the Delta. It is likely that the relatively low rainfall throughout the year was one of the principal factors which encouraged Liverpool merchants to shift trading activities to Angola.
Nevertheless it cannot be shown that the seasonality of departures was influenced strongly by climatic considerations. In the periods examined, there were substantial sailings in each quarter of the year, with a majority of between 51 per cent and 74 per cent occurring in the two middle quarters. The proportions in the first and last quarters varied sharply from period to period and were between 10 per cent in the last quarter in 1799 and 32 per cent in the first quarter in 1804–7. The overall seasonal balance suggests that some merchants either were unaware of the varying West African seasons and their effect on health and trade, or, more likely, were prepared to risk the disadvantages of wet months for the sake of stealing a march on competitors. The irregularity in more detail, particularly from year to year, suggests that factors other than the climatic one entered into the timing of voyages, and that these perhaps operated differentially as between years and periods.

(d) Duration of voyage

Having completed transactions on the African coast and in the Caribbean, the slave-ships returned to Liverpool—without, of course, their slaves. Instead, the slave-fleet returned with small quantities of African produce and large quantities of Caribbean produce (cotton gaining on sugar). But as a part of the proceeds of selling slaves in the West Indies normally returned to Britain in the form of bills of exchange, few ships were fully laden with produce and some returned empty. Caribbean produce could be carried either as freight for another merchant, or as the property of the entrepreneurs organising the voyage, when it represented an investment of all or part of the proceeds of selling slaves: in either case, the captain and local agents had to decide how profitable or unprofitable it would be to wait for or seek out cargo. Thus, Liverpool merchants had to envisage, advise on, and accept a wide range of decisions relating to transactions in the West Indies. Further, on the return of the slave-fleet they frequently found themselves facing more decisions, in relation to the sale of produce and the discounting of bills of exchange. As regards the decisions which in the last analysis had to be taken away from Liverpool by the captain with or without local advice, merchants envisaged these by giving their captains general guidance in the
instructions provided before ships left Liverpool. These instructions were often elaborate, and they referred to decisions to be taken in Africa—in relation to regional trade preferences, selective slave prices, on-board treatment of slaves, and preferred African cargoes—as well as to decisions to be taken in the Caribbean.

The complexity of transactions both on the African coast and in the Caribbean lengthened the overall voyage. From the start of the venture, entrepreneurs had to take account of the fact that the final economic outcome depended not only on immediate profits but on the length of time that capital had been locked up in the voyage. It is therefore important to inquire how long a slave voyage took, from Liverpool to Liverpool. Previous estimates vary from about twelve months to eighteen months. Voyages from Nantes, Liverpool’s French counterpart, are thought to have taken between fifteen and eighteen months, and it was considered unusual for capital outlay to be returned within two years. The Dutch triangular voyages seem to have lasted from sixteen to thirty-two months. Calculations of the duration of Liverpool’s slave voyages were made from the records of two periods, 1791–4 and 1804–7. The Liverpool press, combined with official returns of slave voyages, provided sources for the period 1791–4, while the newspapers had to be used by themselves for the years 1804–7.

Between 1791 and 1794, 208 named vessels sailed from Liverpool for West Africa (excluding a handful engaged in direct-return trade with the West African seaboard). These vessels made 308 voyages in the five years, of which it proved possible to trace the length of 178. Thus the following figures are based on a 45 per cent sample of the voyages in the Liverpool slave trade for those years. Starting with the vessels arriving back in Liverpool in 1792, 59 complete voyages have been traced. Their average time away was just over eleven months (334 days), and the extreme durations were 140 days and 485 days. As perhaps one would expect, the outbreak of the war in 1793 led to an increase in the duration of voyages. The complete voyages of 63 of the ships arriving back in 1793 have been traced: their average duration was just under twelve months (363 days) with extreme durations at 155 days and 636 days. Whilst there was not a large increase in absolute terms over 1792 the outbreak of war did tend
to slow down the triangular voyage, and this trend continued. The completed journeys of 35 of the ships returning in 1794 which have been traced averaged over 12½ months (376 days), and ranged from 206 days to 646 days. The increase in the length of the overall voyage in 1793 and 1794 is the more significant inasmuch as the average length of time spent on the African coast had fallen in those years. A number of ships returning in 1793 and 1794 had experienced unusually long voyages; it is unlikely that the extra duration resulted from exceptionally long periods on the West African coast, and more likely that it was caused by the activities of French privateers in the West Indies. Ten of these returning ships had an average voyage length of 19 months and 19 days, and these exceptional voyages may reasonably be discounted from calculations of the average normal duration of a slave trading voyage. Discounting four voyages in 1793 and six in 1794 reduces the averages for these years to 347 and 341 days, close to the average for ships returning in 1792 (334 days).

Thus it was possible to trace 168 normal voyages in 1791–4 which completed the triangular journey in an average of just over eleven months (340 days). The duration of a slaving venture could vary from 140 to 485 days, and the standard deviation was 92 days. But we can be sure that the average is reasonably meaningful since, of the 168 voyages, no fewer than 107 or 64 per cent were in fact under a year in duration. This majority duration is rather shorter than has often been suggested.

It might have been expected that towards 1807 the average would have shortened because merchants tried to undertake as many voyages as possible before abolition. Between 1804 and 1807, 190 ships were involved in the slave trade from Liverpool. It proved possible to trace from the Liverpool newspapers only 82 journeys. The average for this period was just under twelve months (361 days). The duration of slaving voyages ranged from eight to twenty-five months but the standard deviation was only 92 days, and 60 per cent of the vessels were away from Liverpool for less than a year. Thus it would appear that the average voyage was no shorter than it had been in the 1790s. Even in 1807 the average for 22 returning ships was 360 days. This suggests that there was no significant rush for the last legal slaves. However it must be conceded that the effect of large numbers of French privateers operating in 1807 from Cuba and Haiti, after the
alliance of Spain and Holland with France, may have counter-balanced any movement towards shorter voyages in that year.

The length of a slave-trading voyage was probably related not only to the supply system and the state of the market in a specific part of the West African seaboard, but also to the current demand in Europe for specific West Indian commodities and to the willingness to wait for a Caribbean cargo or for convoy protection. Non-economic factors such as seasonal variations in climate, and problems arising from the state of war, had to be given due weight. Undoubtedly merchants wanted as quick a return on capital outlay as was possible. But while it was technically feasible to complete the triangular voyage within a year, merchants had to balance the time gained from quick turnabouts in Africa and the West Indies against the possibility of loss arising from a less than adequate cargo of slaves, and from an uneconomic cargo from the Caribbean.

PROBLEMS IN AFRICA

(a) The independent produce trade

West Africa’s marine export trade had been founded on the demand for produce rather than slaves. Even after the advent of the triangular network West Africa continued to export gold, ivory, timber, dyewoods, gum, beeswax, leather, spices (notably Malaguetta pepper) and palm oil. These commodities were often purchased by slave-traders, as a supplement to the slave trade or for purposes directly connected with slaving (palm oil, for instance, was fed to the slaves on the Middle Passage), but there was also a steady demand from traders engaged primarily in produce trade. In certain regions of West Africa, the export of commodities such as camwood, ivory and beeswax was always of greater value than the export of slaves. For instance, gum remained the major export of the Senegal valley throughout the slave trade era.

In the later eighteenth century Britain was maintaining and extending its interest in the produce trade. For instance, in 1787 a petition was signed by 57 Liverpool merchants, including prominent slave-traders, asking that the duty on African timber be lowered. At that time, African ebony was charged an import
duty of £8.16 per ton while American ebony was imported duty-free. The petition was rejected. Nevertheless, Liverpool entrepreneurs continued to expand their investment in the produce trade. Unfortunately few official documents record details of vessels sailing to Africa for produce-trading. Statistics relating to ships returning to Liverpool directly from Africa give some indication of the volume of the trade: but the figures are inflated by the inclusion of ships returning in ballast, these being mostly either tenders of the slave-fleet or ships whose main function was to supply the forts on the coast belonging to the Company of Merchants. Hence, it has been necessary to draw information from a variety of minor sources; and it has only proved possible to trace ships sailing from Liverpool to Africa for produce-trading between 1789 and 1793, in 1795, and between 1799 and 1807. In these years the number of these ships sailing annually was small, never exceeding twenty, and normally between four and ten. The proportion of shipping leaving Liverpool for Africa which was engaged solely in the produce trade varied between 2 per cent (1804) and 13 per cent (1807), and averaged only 5 per cent. Thus the produce trade was a useful development of Liverpool’s African contacts, but nevertheless only a minor subsidiary of Liverpool’s African commerce.

Small though it was, Liverpool’s involvement in the produce trade did provide sizeable commercial outlets for a number of Liverpool merchants. In the years 1789–93, 1795 and 1799–1807, thirty-one commercial houses were engaged in the produce trade with Africa. The firm of Henderson and Sellar was most frequently involved, operating eleven voyages during the whole period. Since Henderson and Sellar were also connected with the slave trade, it might seem that slave-traders dominated commodity commerce by utilising their West African experience to switch into the produce trade when economically appropriate. Indeed, of the 53 voyages undertaken by the 31 firms, some 29 were for known slave-traders. However, the remaining 24 voyages were operated by firms that appear to have had no connection with slaving (though it is possible that a few had shares in slave enterprises whose detailed records are not extant). It would appear therefore that a number of Liverpool entrepreneurs not normally engaged in African commerce had decided that investment in the produce trade was an acceptable economic proposi-
tion. In view of the risks involved (including the possibility of commodity prices in Britain slumping radically while the vessel was away from port) and the relatively slow return on capital invested. Liverpool merchants must have seen the African trade as one with potentially high rates of profit. However, it is doubtful whether African supply could have been expanded sufficiently to accommodate large numbers of produce traders as long as the slave trade lasted.

(b) The purchase of produce by slavers

It was necessary to discuss the independent produce trade because slave-traders also dealt in produce; indeed probably only the lesser part of Liverpool's produce trade with West Africa before 1807 was handled by non-slave-traders. Slaving and the trade in produce often existed side by side, in a symbiotic relationship. Brooks has recently suggested that few slave-traders were seriously interested in African produce. He refers to American ivory-traders, who were forced to give extensive credit to African middlemen and were consequently required to wait several months for the ivory to be brought down to the coast; he argues that this was an impracticable delay for slave-traders and thus produce- and slave-trading became differentiated. This proposition underestimates the business acumen of African middlemen. If produce was available in the interior, what better way of reducing costs than by employing the slave-caravan to transport it to the coast? This was particularly true of commodities that had a low bar value in relation to the trade goods received in exchange, and which might therefore prove unprofitable to transport to the coast through the use of paid porters. There is evidence that produce frequently arrived on the coast with the Senegambian slave-caravans, and this no doubt encouraged captains to take produce on board slave-ships. All along the seaboard, produce could often be stored with less difficulty than slaves, and middlemen found it profitable to build up stocks of certain commodities. For instance, Richard Brew, an expatriate slave-trader resident on the Gold Coast, c. 1780, also dealt in gold, beeswax, the provisioning of ships, and most interestingly, the export of Ijebu cloths from Lagos. These cloths, which were brought in coastal launches to the Gold Coast, were consigned to
the firm of Ross and Niel in London, perhaps for re-export to the West Indies or Brazil.\textsuperscript{56}

The owners of slave-ships sometimes gave their captains specific instructions to trade for African produce. For instance, in 1797 Thomas Leyland informed Captain Bernard of the ship Earle that he was to barter the goods consigned to him at ‘Bonney for young healthy negroes, Ivory and Palm oil’, while in 1782 Parke and Heywood instructed Captain Frayer of the Harlequin to proceed ‘with the greatest expedition to the coast of Africa and on your way down to Anamaboe call at Cape Lahoe, Appolonia and such places as you think most likely to furnish gold, ivory and slaves’.\textsuperscript{37} Such instructions might specify that the captain was to conduct his produce-trading operations in a manner contrary to the normal routine of a slave-ship. The use of the long-boat to ply in and out of the rivers on the coast was normally considered inadvisable, as detrimental to the health of the crew and therefore uneconomic. That it was occasionally advised in produce-trading illustrates the value placed by some slave-ship owners on African commodities.

Proceed directly to the River Gambia and there barter our cargo for slaves, gold, wax and teeth, and as you have sufficient cargo we hope you will be able to purchase a good quantity of wax and upon reasonable terms and would have you keep your long boat constantly applying about for it wherever you think it most likely to be had.\textsuperscript{38}

The complex ramifications of this interrelated trading system enabled it to adjust to changing opportunities, which in turn were often limited with the state of international affairs. As well as purchasing slaves and commodities from the mainland entrepreneurs, slavers sometimes operated an inter-ship trade, bartering commodities for slaves and vice versa. This could even take the form of trading one sort of produce to another slave-ship in exchange for slaves and a different sort of produce. Exchanges also took place between produce-trade vessels and slave-ships.\textsuperscript{39}

Indeed it is occasionally impossible to allocate certain vessels to either trade, since cases are known where Liverpool produce merchants contracted to supply slaves to French ships on the coast of Africa.\textsuperscript{40} Evidently produce-traders were aware of the economic possibilities of horizontal integration. Using the smaller vessels to collect produce in the rivers also facilitated the purchase of slaves for delivery on contract, without the problems involved
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in the Middle Passage. The tenders could stay on the coast indefinitely (or at least as long as the crew and hulk survived), supplying produce to the firm’s major carrier, and slaves to the French and other interested parties.

The slave-trader’s decision to purchase African produce depended on his assessment of a number of variable factors. In the first place, a slave-ship’s cargo of merchandise for Africa could be designed to contain a surplus over and above the amount necessary to procure the desired number of slaves; or a surplus could arise due to short-term downward movements in the price of slaves on the African coast, or due to a failure of supply of slaves. This surplus, if not employed or employable in the purchase of extra slaves, could be used to buy produce. Secondly, since the trade goods carried to Africa by slave-ships reflected the ‘assortment’ or package of items which African slave-merchants tended to prefer, and since this assortment could vary from year to year or if the slave-ship traded in a different market from that intended, it was possible for the ship to finish up with an unbalanced selection of goods unsuitable for further slave-trading; and in this case it was desirable to consider alternative uses for the remaining stock of goods. Thirdly, at some point in the trading a captain might decide, even if slaves were still available for the goods he held, to switch to produce, perhaps of one particular kind, by weighing alternative costs. Fourthly, when trading for produce, account had to be taken both of the prime cost of goods (whereas the assortment mixed loss-leaders and high-return items) and of possible fluctuations in the prices of African commodities in Britain, not least in instances where demand was fairly limited and over-supply might tumble prices. To some extent this range of decisions was reduced by act of parliament. The Dolben Act of 1788 restricted the numbers of slaves that could be carried on slave-ships, and this sometimes prevented a captain from using a surplus of trade goods to buy additional slaves and forced him to buy produce instead. If, as has been suggested, average profits in the slave trade fell somewhat in the last two decades of the trade, this may have encouraged further expansion in the subsidiary produce trade.

Shipping information appearing in the contemporary Liverpool press indicates that in the last years of the slave trade few slave-ships returned to Liverpool without some African cargo on
board. The real value of African produce carried by the Liverpool slave-fleet fluctuated with prices in Britain, and it was possible for losses to be made on return cargoes. But the Davies-Davenport papers show instances where African produce accounted for as much as 60 per cent of net proceeds.\textsuperscript{43} Though such a figure was doubtless abnormal, it is not uncommon to find African cargoes accounting for between 20 per cent and 30 per cent of net proceeds. To give two instances of substantial African cargoes, both relating to a ship returning from Africa and Surinam in 1805, the \textit{Molly} carried 51 tons of barwood, 51 puncheons of palm oil, and 10 cwt. of ivory, of total estimated real value of £5,335; and the \textit{Lord Nelson} carried 853 ‘elephant teeth’ and 6 tons of Malaguetta pepper, valued at £6,535. The above volumes of produce may have been abnormally large for returning slave-ships, yet there can be no doubt that African cargoes were sometimes of significant economic importance to the slave-trader and cannot be ignored either when considering his decision-making, or when attempting to evaluate the profitability of slave enterprises.\textsuperscript{44}

Nevertheless, the African produce trade appears to have been, in total, of only limited value to Liverpool’s merchant community. The relevant customs figures unfortunately only detail imports at the national level, but even these provide some guide to the volume of Liverpool’s trade in African commodities. Between 1786 and 1790, total imports into Britain from Africa had an average annual value of £100,000, compared to imports from Ireland averaging £1,985,000 and imports from the West Indies averaging £3,474,000. By the period 1796–1800, the average imports from Ireland and the West Indies had risen to values of £2,385,000 and £5,898,000 per annum, respectively, while imports from Africa had fallen to an annual average value of £72,000. Thereafter the value of African imports rose again, but in 1805 the value was still only £193,034.\textsuperscript{45} It would seem that at a period when British imports from other regions were increasing imports from Africa were barely holding their own, at least relatively. However, since most slave-ships returned with African produce on board, Liverpool could undoubtedly claim a high proportion of the national imports of African goods. The value of only three commodities, redwood, camwood and ivory, imported into Liverpool in 1805 amounted to £70,790 (real value).\textsuperscript{46} Even if the total value of African imports into Liverpool
was relatively slight, the merchant community, and Britain, benefited from the African produce trade since Africa was virtually the only supplier of barwood/redwood, camwood, ivory, gum, Malaguetta pepper and palm oil. Finally, the experience gained in the produce trade during this period proved invaluable to those Liverpool merchants who sought new or extended openings in Africa after the abolition.

(c) Pricing slaves

One of the major problems facing Liverpool merchants was the varying price of slaves along the West African seaboard. Liverpool entrepreneurs seem to have preferred to purchase lower-priced slaves and accept less for them in the West Indies, rather than to engage in competition for the ‘superior’ slaves. Pricing mechanisms were often highly complex affairs. The first requisite of trade in any barter economy is an agreed standard of exchange, and a regular form of currency was adopted along most of the West African coast by at least the early eighteenth century. The unit varied from region to region, and might be the ‘ounce’, the bar of iron, or numbers of cowries. The ‘ounce’ was in most general use. It was defined as the nominal value set upon goods which cost about 40 shillings in Europe but sold in trade upon the coast of Africa for £4, which was the value of the ounce of gold. This implied that European entrepreneurs aimed at a 100 per cent markup on goods traded in Africa. Each commodity to be exchanged had a recognised value in terms of the ‘ounce’ of trade, and a slave was bartered for an assortment of commodities equivalent to a given number of ‘ounces’. However, a change in the concentration of African demand for specific commodities could mean that their ‘ounce’ value resulted in a mark-up greater or less than the desired 100 per cent. Moreover, the ship’s captain had to comply with the preferences of African merchants relating to trade goods, and therefore had to make an astute manipulation of the assortment in order to keep the overall mark-up near the expected level. Excessive movement in demand for particular goods was not reflected in the ‘ounce’ value of the commodity, at least not in the short run, since the demand would be assimilated by adjustments of the assortment, though continued concentration of demand would affect the ‘ounce’ value
of a commodity in the long run. On the other hand, the number of ‘ounces’ demanded for the slave could fluctuate both in the short and long run depending on the level of current demand.\textsuperscript{49} Short-term fluctuations in slave price could disrupt the calculations of merchants. A cargo organised for the purchase of 350 slaves at 11 ‘ounces’ each would clearly purchase fewer slaves if the buying price rose above 11 ‘ounces’.

The slave-trader organised his cargo on the basis of personal assessment of current slave prices on the coast (allowing for mark-up), and the type of trade goods required in the assortments. His knowledge of both was vital to the success of the venture. Since both prices and the goods required varied from area to area, the Liverpool entrepreneur had to be well informed in order to decide where to operate at economic advantage. Failure to ship an adequate supply of the goods currently demanded in a particular region was likely to result in an inadequate intake of slaves.\textsuperscript{50} It is true that insufficient supplies of specific items could sometimes be remedied by inter-ship trade off the West African coast, but contact with other ships was not always possible. Liverpool merchants therefore regularly instructed their captains to bring back detailed information from West Africa regarding the conditions of future demand and supply. Yet no matter how carefully a cargo was organised, the demand in a particular West African locality for certain commodities might be satiated in the period between the planning of a voyage and the arrival in West Africa. This could well result in an unserviceable cargo surplus, and risks would be involved in attempting to expend it by moving to another region of the coast. An alternative strategy would be, as we have seen, the employment of the cargo surplus in the purchase of African produce.

Liverpool entrepreneurs had only very limited opportunities to influence the pricing system. Although the ship’s captain was in a position to manipulate the assortment, the extent to which he could do this and the effectiveness of the manoeuvre depended on the existing state of commerce. Excessive demand for slaves in a particular region put the market firmly in the hands of the vendor, and the slave-trader was consequently forced to comply with the requirements of the African middlemen. The ‘ounce’ price of a slave was almost entirely regulated by the coastal entrepreneur, on the basis of supply and demand. Collusive price agreements
among Liverpool merchants had probably only limited chances of success, except perhaps in a glutted market. In this sector of African commerce, the opportunity for effective decision-making was mainly in relation to where to trade, that is, regional preferences.

The European merchant had also little opportunity to influence or mitigate the system of duties and customs at the African ports. In general each visiting slave-ship was required to give a present or ‘dash’ to the local chief for permission to trade. These ‘dashes’ could be as elementary as a small quantity of bread and beef; or they could be as expensive as the price of two slaves. Further gifts had to be given every time the chief came into contact with the ship. Favour was also sought by ‘dashing’ the king’s wives, officers and slaves. As well as more or less informal ‘dashes’, the slavers were expected to pay formal duties or ‘comey’ to the African polity. At major bulking centres such as Whydah these dues were considerable. ‘Dashes’ and ‘comey’ were undoubtedly a drain on the cargo available for trade (since they were generally paid in kind), but the most Liverpool merchants could do was to instruct their captains to be as parsimonious as possible. Variations in the amount of duty demanded at specific centres may have been a factor affecting the regional preferences of Liverpool merchants.

(d) Regional preferences

Variations in the price and quality of slaves, regularity of supply, customs duties, and seasons, all combined to affect the choice of West African destination. In the early years of the Atlantic slave-trade the parts of the Western seaboard most frequently visited by slavers were Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Windward Coast (modern Liberia and Ivory Coast). Recent work has suggested that the sources of slaves gradually shifted eastwards during the latter decades of the eighteenth century. Examination of extant Liverpool business records indicates that this eastwards movement in slaving applies equally to Liverpool’s slave-fleet. Lists of destinations of slave-ships sailing from London, Bristol and Liverpool between 1791 and 1797 in official returns have also been examined in an attempt to quantify the movement. Unfortunately these records did not always note the region or port of call in
West Africa, and the figures for the period 1791-7 are consequently only based on a sample of 27 per cent of listed voyages. This restricted evidence suggests that the most popular regions for British slavers in the 1790s were those east of the River Volta; 75 per cent of the slave-ships leaving Britain for Africa were destined for the Niger Delta region (modern Togo, Dahomey and Nigeria) and the South Coast (modern Cameroun, Gabon, Congo and Angola). These were especially the major supply areas for the Liverpool slave trade. The percentage of Liverpool's slave-ships sailing to the region east of the River Volta averaged 77 per cent between 1791 and 1797. Thereafter the proportion trading with the Niger Delta and South Coast rose and fell a little, reaching 83 per cent in 1798 and 77 per cent again in 1803, but falling to 67 per cent in 1800 and 60 per cent in 1807. (The figures for 1798-1800, 1803 and 1807 were calculated on the basis of practically a 100 per cent sample.) Clearly Liverpool's influence in these regions was extensive. Since Liverpool dominated the British trade the fact that a high proportion of Liverpool's slave-fleet was destined for the regions east of the River Volta must have meant that the trade of the Delta and South Coast was very much in the hands of Liverpool merchants. A statement made half a century later referred to Liverpool's position in this region.

When the slave trade existed between this country and the Africans it was almost confined to Liverpool, and the natives have only known Liverpool as their 'friends' as they call them; and if other ships, for instance belonging to London or Bristol, visit the Rivers they call them 'small country' vessels and do not look upon them as legitimate traders; it is a characteristic attached to Liverpool.

Official trade statistics generally treated the region east of River Volta as a single district, and failed to provide separate information on the Delta and the South Coast. In the light of Liverpool's interest in the Gulf of Guinea, it might be thought that the bulk of Liverpool's slave trade immediately before abolition was with the Niger Delta, the South Coast taking only a minor share, but this does not appear to be a valid assumption. According to the sample of official returns cited earlier, by the last years of the slave trade the South Coast was rivalling the Niger Delta as the major supplier of slaves to Liverpool ships, and it actually overtook the Delta in nearly half the years (1798,
In 1791–7 the South Coast accounted for just over 20 per cent of the Liverpool slave trade; in 1798–1807 for nearly 40 per cent. Undoubtedly there were many reasons for this eastwards movement in the trade. But probably one of the more important was the ability to trade all year round on the Angola coast, and for much of the year on the seaboards of Gabon and Congo, in favourable climatic circumstances, because of the relatively light annual rainfall noted earlier.

(e) **Turn-around times**

Time meant money to the Liverpool entrepreneur. It is conceivable that regional preferences were much influenced by variations in the length of time required to load with slaves on different sections of the West African coast. An examination of turn-around times has been based on those official returns which specify dates of arrival and departure in relation to named regions of the coast. Since however the full details are recorded for only a small proportion of the total of ships listed, in order to provide a sample of sufficient size for each of the named regions, the figures that follow relate to all British slave voyages, that is, voyages from London and Bristol as well as from Liverpool.

A further word of explanation is necessary with regard to trans-shipping. A number of vessels were involved in trans-shipping slaves; that is, they bought slaves on the coast and transferred them to other ships. Trans-shipping of small numbers of slaves was a relatively normal occurrence; either support vessels fed a mother ship with slaves or a slave-ship sold a few surplus slaves to a competing slave-ship. But trans-shipping of large numbers of slaves usually involved the vessel in a longer stay on the coast than was normal. As a result, while some of these transhippers proceeded eventually to the West Indies with a cargo of slaves, others returned directly to Britain for refitting. For instance, R. Fisher and Company had two ships, the *Echo* and the *Philip Steven*, which in 1792 returned to Liverpool from West Africa with reported times away from port of 364 and 612 days respectively. Both were carrying a minute cargo, inconsistent with the time away. Since these ships were neither laden with produce nor returning from the West Indies, it is highly likely that they had been transshipping: either they had been contracted to provide
slaves for other vessels on the West African coast or else for some reason they had been rendered incapable of completing the voyage to the West Indies. Vessels trans-shipping on this scale were involved in a separate branch of the trade; therefore vessels that had off-loaded to other ships more than a quarter of the total number of slaves taken on board have been excluded from the study of turn-around time. The figures below refer only to vessels engaged in the normal form of the slave trade.

Average length of stay on the coast has been calculated for each year from 1791 to 1797, for six separate regions of the coast; and an overall average for the seven years has been computed (Table 1). These figures indicate the length of time a merchant could anticipate that his vessel would await supply in specific areas of the Western seaboard. The average for the seven years was just under 3½ months (101 days). Annual turn-around times fluctuated, rising to 127 and 131 days in 1791 and 1795, and falling to 90, 86 and 73 days in 1793, 1796 and 1797. The more rapid turn-arounds achieved in 1793 and 1794 may have resulted from the drastic reduction in the number of slave-ships trading to West Africa in 1793, due first to the outbreak of war with France, and secondly to the general financial crisis of 1793 with its collapse in credit. It must have been easier to supply the smaller number of ships visiting the coast in 1793 than was normally the case, while the 1793 residue of supply over demand may have been utilised to meet the requirements of the increased number of ships arriving on the Western seaboard in 1794.

Table 1 Length of stay on the coast, in days, by regions, 1791-1797: numbers of ships in brackets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Whole Coast</th>
<th>Senegambia</th>
<th>Sierra Leone</th>
<th>Windward Coast</th>
<th>Gold Coast</th>
<th>Delta Coast</th>
<th>South Coast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1791</td>
<td>127 (70)</td>
<td>229 (1)</td>
<td>202 (8)</td>
<td>176 (3)</td>
<td>125 (2)</td>
<td>103 (35)</td>
<td>141 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1792</td>
<td>118 (80)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>183 (11)</td>
<td>209 (2)</td>
<td>38 (1)</td>
<td>101 (27)</td>
<td>82 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1793</td>
<td>90 (31)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>134 (6)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>39 (1)</td>
<td>103 (3)</td>
<td>89 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1794</td>
<td>86 (33)</td>
<td>11 (1)</td>
<td>53 (2)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>96 (2)</td>
<td>89 (9)</td>
<td>97 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>131 (23)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>132 (3)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>164 (3)</td>
<td>88 (3)</td>
<td>128 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1796</td>
<td>106 (22)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>131 (4)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>111 (1)</td>
<td>107 (2)</td>
<td>96 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1797</td>
<td>73 (31)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>149 (1)</td>
<td>90 (2)</td>
<td>166 (1)</td>
<td>49 (18)</td>
<td>119 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1791-97</td>
<td>101 (290)</td>
<td>120 (2)</td>
<td>157 (35)</td>
<td>160 (7)</td>
<td>118 (11)</td>
<td>91 (97)</td>
<td>107 (61)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Moreover the French were extremely active in African waters during 1794, and a French fleet attacked and sacked Freetown. These actions must have encouraged British captains to aim at quicker turn-arounds. The rapid turn-around of 1797 is less easy to explain. Rumours of an impending French invasion of Britain may conceivably have encouraged slavers to hasten home; or there may have been a sudden increased supply of slaves due to hinterland upheavals. But this is mere speculation. What is clear about the 1797 average is that it was produced largely by the experience of a single region, the Delta. This leads us to examine the range of regional variations in turn-around time.

Table 1 shows that on average the most rapid turn-around was achieved on the eastern end of the coast, in the Niger Delta and on the South Coast. It may be conceded that the number of traced voyages to Senegambia and the Windward and Gold Coasts is too small to be statistically significant; but the pattern suggested is reasonably consistent with that of the larger number of voyages to Sierra Leone. It is therefore fair to ask why did ships spend more time in the western than in the eastern regions? The simplest explanation, that the longer a ship took to reach its trading region, the shorter the time it could afford to spend there, cannot be adequate, since ships returned with similar numbers of slaves from each region. The explanation must lie, at least in large part, in the supply system of the regions. Though there is insufficient evidence to describe the supply system in detail, it is certain that there were factors which tended to bring about regional variations in volume and regularity of supply, and the records provide glimpses of these variations.

The Windward Coast lacked suitable harbours, and trade was therefore conducted by cruising along the seaboard and anchoring outside the bar of rivers. Small boats or tenders were used to ply across the bar, in and out of the rivers, in search of trade. This could be a lengthy process, and one likely to increase the incidence of sickness among the crew. Goods and slaves were then exchanged either on the beach—an inherently dangerous operation away from the safety of the ship—or by canoe across the surf, a tedious and precarious task. Supply was generally organised by small-scale entrepreneurs, African, European, and Afro-European, with limited stocks of slaves and limited
capacity to obtain more rapidly. These small suppliers would also appear to have been the norm along the neighbouring Sierra Leone seaboard, so that here, too, despite the existence of some good harbours, slaving was a relatively slow business. In the Senegambia and Gold Coast regions, turn-about time could vary according to whether the ship was being supplied by a company agent with foreknowledge of the ship’s arrival, by an independent entrepreneur providing limited supplies, or by a large-scale supplier under the control of an African polity. European residents often found it difficult to meet demand on a large scale without the assistance and co-operation of African middlemen. The facility with which demand for slaves could be met was also dependent on the official and personal activities of the governors of the various forts under the control of the Company of Merchants trading to Africa. Probably because of the alternative supply mechanisms available, the turn-around time on the Gold Coast could vary from 38 days to 166 days.

Turning to the eastern regions, the Niger Delta and the South Coast had good harbours and large-scale suppliers, and perhaps more fundamentally, their slave trade derived from regular hinterland sources. ‘It was precisely the regions of the African coast, the Niger Delta and Congo/Angola respectively, which were linked to trading networks in the interior . . . which were able to yield up, until 1800, a large and increasing supply of slaves.’ Table 1 suggests that the eastern regions were capable of meeting demands for slaves more rapidly than the other regions; and this fits what is known about their supply mechanisms. Evidence about the volume and regularity of supply can be obtained from the log-books of slave-ships. On the western coasts, though there existed bulking centres such as Bunce Island and Whydah where companies could stock slaves, in general ships made up their cargo by small purchases, in single numbers from small suppliers, with days intervening between purchases. On the South Coast, though daily purchases were often small, they were more regular: large numbers of slaves, brought from the interior in caravans, were stocked on the coast by African merchants, who sold them off in small numbers to European traders. The log-books of 15 vessels trading on the South Coast between 1791 and 1794 record a normal daily intake of five slaves and less, with occasional larger purchases, the largest of 68 slaves.
Finally, in the Delta, slaves could often be obtained in large numbers. For instance, in 1792, the *Brook* took on board 81 slaves on 10 October, 87 slaves on 21 October, and 61 slaves on 3 November; and in 1795, the *James* took on board 117 slaves on 1 March, 169 slaves on 10 March and 51 slaves on 12 March.

The reasons why the Delta and the South Coast could supply slaves faster are now well known. In both regions, African traders on the coast were in contact with interior networks; for instance, Delta 'Houses' were in contact with the Aro network in Igbo country.

Fairs where the slaves of the Heebo nation are obtained, are held every five or six weeks at several villages which are situated on the banks of rivers and creeks in the interior, and to which the traders of Bonny resort to purchase them. The preparation necessary for going to these fairs generally occupies the Bonny people for some days. Large canoes, capable of carrying 120 persons, are launched and stored for this voyage. The traders augment the quantity of their merchandize by obtaining from their friends, the captains of slave ships, a considerable quantity of goods on credit according to the extent of the business they are in the habit of transacting.\(^6\)

Large-scale purchases of slaves in the interior required large stocks of trade goods; and the operations of the African slave-merchants depended on their being granted credit by the European slave-merchants who imported the goods. In other regions, European residents had always received goods on credit; and expatriates on the Gold Coast had even been able to pay visiting ships for commodities with bills of exchange drawn on a company in London.\(^6\) But in general it was unusual to give African merchants credit; and the exceptional development of this system in the Delta may have been linked to the existence, at one of the ports, Old Calabar, of an institution, the Ekpe, which though traditional in origin, was apparently capable of being employed as a debt-collecting agency.\(^7\)

While the study of turn-around times undoubtedly suggests reasons why Liverpool slavers came to prefer the eastern regions of the coast, it also shows that slave-trading was not without major uncertainties and many unpredictable elements. Even Table 1 indicates that many voyages had exceptional turn-around times: why, for instance, did the Delta turn-around time fall to an average of 49 days in 1797, and why did the two traced voyages to Senegambia stay there respectively 229 and 11 days?
Even in the Delta, supply networks were not so efficiently organised that they provided a completely flexible reaction to European demand. Had they done so, then there would have been a regular relationship between the total number of slaves taken on board and the turn-around time. Using the data in the official records again, the relationship has been investigated for all traced slave-ships in a single year (1791), first for all ports in West Africa, then for Delta ports, and finally for a single Delta port, Bonny. But no regular relationship appears even at the level of a single port. To take the Delta: 19 ships in the sample loaded at the average rate of between 2 and 4 slaves per day, but 15 ships lay outside this broad band, 6 loading faster (up to 7 slaves per day) and 9 loading more slowly (down to 0.2 slaves per day). While it may have been of some value to Liverpool entrepreneurs to know that, in the most effective loading region, a ship could, more often than not, obtain 300 slaves in from 75 to 150 days, and that occasionally a ship could do even better, this rule-of-thumb had to include the corollary that there was a one-in-five chance that a ship might take longer. Many factors controlled hinterland supply, the prevalence of wars and other slave-making occasions, and the personal requirements of the primary supplier, as well as current prices on the coast and expectations of future demand. However devoted the Liverpool slave merchants were to the cause of economic efficiency, they were in no position to organise African conditions and institutions; and though they showed flexibility in their responses to the circumstances of the West African coast, for instance, in their regional preferences, the slave trade remained a fairly chancy business, a fact which may have helped to reconcile them to its abolition when it came.

NOTES

1 This paper draws on my unpublished thesis, 'Liverpool's African commerce before and after the abolition of the slave trade', M.A., Liverpool, 1974. Since presenting the thesis, I have been living in Borneo, with only limited facilities for academic work; and the publication of this paper was made possible by the co-operation of the supervisor of my thesis, Dr P. E. H. Hair, who prepared the final draft. Notes relating to studies of the trade which were not available to me at the time of writing the thesis have been added by Dr Hair and are indicated with an asterisk. The relevant part of the thesis is based on the official
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sources described in Appendix II to D. P. Lamb's article (pp. 106-9), and on the Liverpool press. Each of these two major sources lists a number of voyages not recorded in the other; and the Liverpool press, though its coverage is generally not as wide as that of the official returns, provides additional information, particularly about return dates and cargoes. For further discussion of sources, see the note in my thesis, pp. 1-8. I am indebted to Professor R. T. Anstey for drawing my attention to the House of Lords records, and for showing me drafts of forthcoming articles and his book; and I have benefited from lengthy discussions with my friend and fellow-student of the Liverpool trade, Frank Sanderson.


4 J. Wallace, General and descriptive account of the ancient and present state of the town of Liverpool (Liverpool, 1795), p. 229; E. Williams, Capitalism and slavery (1944), p. 37.


7 Shipping columns of the contemporary Liverpool press.

8 J. A. Picton, Memorials of Liverpool (1875), 1, p. 271.

9 Pope, 1, p. 475; 2, p. 334.

10 Merritt, pp. 54-5.

11 Heywood Papers (in the possession of Barclays Bank, at Heywood's Branch, Liverpool, and studied by kind permission of the manager), balance sheets for 1787.

12 Liverpool Customs House, Annual merchant ship registers: a new registration had to be made for every change in a vessel's ownership and for any substantial alteration in the vessel's construction. Earlier in the century British-built ships in the Bristol slave trade lasted 10-12 years: for a detailed discussion of the shipping aspect of that trade, see P. D. Richardson, ‘The Bristol slave trade in the eighteenth century’, unpublished M.A. thesis, Manchester, 1969 (hereafter Richardson), chap. 3.

13 Keele University Library, Davies-Davenport Papers, also on microfilm in Liverpool University Library (hereafter Davies-Davenport), letter of 26.5.1753 from W. Davenport to Captain Sachevorall.

14 R. C. Jarvis, Liverpool customs letterbooks (1954), letters of 21.11.1773, 5.1.1780: for complications relating to cargoes in the earlier slave trade from Bristol, see Richardson, chap. 2.

15 On obtaining crew and insurance, see Anstey, pp. 12-13.


17 Sources: 1790-4 figures, House of Lords Records Office, Slave trade papers (hereafter HLRO/ST), 1.7.1799, 'Table of extracts from slave-
ship logbooks'; 1798 figures, R. Brooke, *Liverpool during the last quarter of the eighteenth century* (Liverpool, 1893), pp. 681-4; 1799 figures, *Liverpool and slavery...* by a genuine Dicky Sam (Liverpool, 1884; reprinted 1969), pp. 120-9; 1804-7 figures, Liverpool press. For detailed figures, see pp. 201-3 of my thesis. * A similar analysis reaching similar conclusions is presented in D. P. Lamb, 'The English slave trade in its final phase from the early 1770s to 1807', unpublished M.A. dissertation, Exeter, 1974 (hereafter Lamb), pp. 20-1 and Table 14. Lamb shows that in 1785-97 clearances from Britain to West Africa were at all times of the year, though at a maximum in the summer quarters: the quarterly proportions for Liverpool vessels were 17 per cent, 31 per cent, 28 per cent, 24 per cent. Sources: 1785-8 figures, a customs series in *Parliamentary Papers (PP)* 1789, XXIV, 631, pp. 1-8, which includes a small number of produce vessels; 1789-1797 figures, PRO T64/286 and HLRO/ST.


19 *As far as is known, no slave-ship ever brought a cargo of slaves to the Mersey, contrary to local mythology (cf. Williams, *Capitalism and slavery, op. cit.*, p. 63); and probably the only black faces seen in Liverpool in the eighteenth century were those of free blacks or slaves who were domestic servants of captains or West Indian planters passing through or of resident merchants, and those of young relatives of Black African traders who were being educated in Liverpool.*


21 Cf. Merritt, p. 4.


24 See p. 146 below.

25 Merritt, p. 4; A. Mackenzie-Grieve, *The last years of the English slave trade 1750-1807* (1941), p. 24; Anstey, p. 36. * Using a different source, PRO T64/286, Lamb analyses the duration of 376 voyages from Liverpool 1790-5 (pp. 76-8, Table 39). He calculates an average of 372 days, against 356 and 361 days for voyages from London and Bristol, with 52 per cent of the Liverpool voyages taking under 360 days. Though this broadly agrees with the text in showing that over half the voyages took under a year, the average duration is 2–3 weeks longer than that indicated in the text for a normal voyage in the shorter period 1791-4.

26 Note that the two periods had the same standard deviation.
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28 PRO Board of Trade 6/7, ‘Memorial of Liverpool merchants trading to Africa’, 3.2.1787.
29 Sources: 1789–93 figures, PRO T64/286 and Liverpool press, HLRO/ST, 22.3.1794; 1799–1807 figures, Liverpool University Library (LUL), Peet Papers 15.3.159, ‘List of vessels sailed to Africa for legitimate trade 1799–1804’; Liverpool Public Library (LPL), Roscoe Papers, 5067, ‘List of ships clearing Liverpool for a general cargo 1806–8’.
30 After 1780, while Liverpool was concentrating on the slave trade and had overtaken Bristol and London, these other ports became more active in the produce trade, particularly on the western part of the coast: see my thesis, pp. 52–3. Meanwhile Liverpool’s specialisation in eastern coast produce led to palm oil being regularly imported several decades before the 1810s, contrary to what is implied in K. O. Dike, Trade and politics in the Niger Delta 1830–1885 (1956), p. 49.
31 For a list, see Appendix 6 of my thesis.
32 Between 1789 and 1807, the average length of traced produce voyages was 13½ months, compared with an average of just under one year for normal slaving voyages. Perhaps because of the deterioration in vessels caused by delays on the coast and consequent slower returns, between 1789 and 1796 no fewer than 12 out of 27 Liverpool produce trade ships were lost at sea or captured by the enemy. Sources: PRO T64/286 and Liverpool press.
37 L.U.L., Dumbell Papers, letter of T. Leyland to Captain Bernard of the Earle, 5.4.1797; letter of Parke and Heywood to Captain Frayer of the Harlequin, 1782.
38 Davies-Davenport, letter to Captain Sachevorall of the Charming Nancy, 26.7.1753.
40 Such a contract was undertaken in 1787 by the three firms of Joseph Woods, Ralph Fisher and Co., and Hartly, Cumpstick and Co., of which the last two were firms normally engaged in the produce trade: BM Add. MSS. 33416, f. 89. In 1787 the Fisher Company despatched to Gabon three ships of 37 tons, 62 tons, and 411 tons, all listed as ‘wood’ ships. The smaller vessels were capable of plying in and out of the rivers and collecting produce, which was then carried back to Liverpool on the larger ship. But in this same year the company undertook to supply 500 slaves to the French on the African coast; and it must be assumed that the slaves were collected on the ‘wood’ vessels. Similarly, the only vessels sailing to Africa in 1787 for Hartly, Cumpstick and Co. were three ships of 93, 100 and 232 tons, destination the Windward coast, all listed as ‘wood’ carriers. Yet this firm was contracted to supply 1200 slaves to the French on the African coast.
41 V. M. Johnson, ‘Sidelights of the Liverpool slave trade 1789–1807’,


42 Anstey, Table 1, p. 47.

43 Davies-Davenport, accounts of the Preston, 9.7.1787.

44 Cf. Anstey, p. 45.

45 E. Schumpeter, English overseas trade statistics 1697–1808 (1960), Table VI, p. 18; PP, Accounts and papers, 1812, x, p. 83. The figures are official values.


47 Merritt, p. 69.


49 Falconbridge, Account, op. cit., p. 9.


53 HLRG/ST, 1.7.1799, ‘Table of extracts from slave ship’s logbooks’.

54 Sources: 1798 figures, Gomer Williams, History, op. cit., pp. 682–4; 1799 figures, Dicky-Sam, Liverpool and slavery, op. cit., pp. 120–5; 1800 and 1803 figures, LUL, Peet Papers, XIV, 3, 159; 1807 figures, LPL, Roscoe Papers, 5603.

55 PP, Accounts and papers, 1850, IX, p. 213, evidence of R. Dawson.

56 Williamson’s Liverpool Advertiser, 18.6.1792, 24.12.1792.

57 The dividing line is necessarily arbitrary: the number of regular trans-shipping vessels thereby excluded between 1791 and 1797 is 32. * For a detailed study of trans-shipping and re-landing in the 1790s, see Lamb, pp. 47–54.

58 The source of Table 1 is HLRG/ST, 28.7.1800 (order date 10.7.1799). The regions are defined as follows: south to River Gambia (Senegambia); east to Cape Mesurado (Sierra Leone); east to Cape Apollonia (Windward Coast); east to River Volta (Gold Coast); east to River Cameroons (Niger Delta); south to southern Angola (South Coast). The base number for each year is the number of vessels whose time on the coast was recorded, less the number trans-shipping more than one-quarter of the total of slaves. Since times are recorded for some vessels whose exact destination was not stated, the figure in the left-hand column exceeds the total of the figures in the other columns. * Lamb provides a different breakdown of almost the same basic figures and shows that in the whole period 1790–7, of all British ships trading in West Africa, 17 per cent took less than 49 days, 32 per cent took 50–99 days, 25 per cent took 100–149 days, 15 per cent took 150–199 days, and 11 per cent took 200–369 days. The average trading duration was 113 days. Of all ships trading in the Niger Delta (defined differently
and including part of Drake’s ‘Gold Coast’ and excluding part of his ‘South Coast’), the average trading duration was 97 days, and the proportions for the periods given above were 23 per cent, 33 per cent, 27 per cent, 10 per cent and 6 per cent (Table 22). Note the large proportion of relatively quick turn-arounds in the Delta.

59 F. E. Hyde, B. B. Parkinson, and S. Marriner, ‘The port of Liverpool and the crisis of 1793’, Economica, n.s. 18 (1951), p. 367. Voyage durations increased in 1793 and 1794 (see pp. 133–4): the wartime conditions which probably were responsible may also have meant that there was less international competition on the African coast.


62 BM Add. MSS. 33416, f. 35, letter of E. Corrie; f. 154, letter of J. Jones.

63 For instance, Richard Brew, an expatriate trader on the Gold Coast, succeeded in creating a major riot at Anomabu when he tried to eliminate the gold takers from their role as intermediaries between the hinterland markets and the coastal entrepreneurs. On the other hand, acting as agent for a London company, Brew had sufficient credit to enable him to organise a bulking centre at Anomabu for the company: Priestley, West African trade, op. cit., pp. 71–2.

64 Although the governors were specifically instructed not to trade on their own account, there can be no doubt that this regulation was frequently ignored. In 1778 it was claimed that at least one-half of all the Gold Coast’s trade passed unofficially through the hands of the Company’s officials. BM Add. MSS. 42074, vol. VIII, f. 57; Falconbridge, Account, op. cit., p. 54; B. Cruikshank, Eighteen years on the Gold Coast (1853), pp. 82–3.

65 Anstey, pp. 78–9.

66 HLRO/ST, 19.6.1799 and 28.7.1800 (order date 10.7.1799): 110 log-books specify area of trade and number of slaves taken aboard each day. * Lamb provides a more detailed analysis of daily purchases of slaves on 248 voyages to specified regions 1790–1797 (pp. 39–41 and Table 23). Regional averages were: Sierra Leone 2.67, Angola 4.26, Gold Coast 4.61, Niger Delta 5.22. Moreover 70 per cent of the Sierra Leone region vessels purchased at an average rate of under 2.00 per day, compared with less than 10 per cent in every other region; and 30 per cent of the Gold Coast vessels and 29 per cent of the Niger Delta ones purchased at an average rate of over 6.00 per day, compared with 5 per cent for Sierra Leone and 16 per cent for Angola. Note that these region are not the same as those in the text (see note 22).


69 John Adams, Sketches taken during voyages to Africa (1822), pp. 112–14; Priestley, West African trade, op. cit., p. 75.

71 Source as in note 66. For more detailed results, see my thesis, Appendix 10. * And for recent comment on the inelasticity of slave supply, see J. C. Miller, 'Legal Portuguese slaving from Angola, 1760-1830', in P. Emmer, J. Mettas, and J.-C. Nardin (eds.), *La traite des noirs par l'atlantique*, special number of *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 62 (1975), p. 159.