

# Black power:

history's greatest black achievers

The International Slavery Museum opens its doors in Liverpool next week with an exhibition naming history's greatest black achievers.

Some are household names, others barely known. All are extraordinary. Playwright Kwame Kwei-Armah introduces the list in full

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I first visited Liverpool in the summer of 1989, and I've never forgotten how alien I felt walking through its city centre. The looks, the energy; hard to quantify nearly 20 years later, but it seemed the antithesis of the welcome I received in Liverpool's black district – Toxteth L8. When I enquired as to why I felt so odd, an "L8onian" told me that "we are not welcome in the city, that's why we have Toxteth".

It soon become evident that many black Liverpudlians felt the same way; a seething anger that this town – one almost in denial that its wealth was directly founded on the accumulated profits of the transatlantic slave trade – had almost swept them under the carpet, far away from the eyes hearts and minds of the nation. Over and over again I heard where, in a city awash with images and tributes to those that benefited from the trade, were the monuments to those Africans that

died in it – a cry not dissimilar to those I would hear in Bristol, Manchester or London.

Almost 20 years on, post-Lawrence inquiry Britain has changed. Not enough, I wager, but the overt side of racism, the one easily detected by the human eye, can in my opinion almost be confined to history. But what of Liverpool? Is denial of its slave roots also a thing of the past? Well, it was the first city council to unreservedly apologise for the role the city played.

And now, next Thursday, Slavery Remembrance Day 2007, a day that commemorates the uprising of enslaved Africans on the island of St Domingo (modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Liverpool will open the doors of the new International Slavery Museum, at the heart of National Museums Liverpool. At last, a serious tribute to the tens of millions of lives affected by this barbaric trade; an interactive monument that says that we can talk about

this, study this subject – intelligently, artistically, truthfully, without guilt, without denial, without fear.

I'm told there will be thought-provoking displays about the origins of the trade, its operations, its economic contribution to the Industrial Revolution and so forth, but what really excites me is a venture that has already opened its doors – the Centre for the Study of International Slavery, a joint research centre the museum has started with the University of Liverpool. It will organise interdisciplinary academic conferences, seminars and workshops; build up a slavery research network with scholars in Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and the USA; and offer an MA in Atlantic History: Slavery, Race, and Colonialism and postgraduate research programmes. Wow!

When I first became interested in black history and the transatlantic slave trade, one had to search hard to find a small local black

book-shop that stocked such work, invariably imported from America. But now, in Liverpool, for this and generations to come, there is an institution dedicated to scholarly research – and it's right on our doorsteps.

A wonderful example of this newfound freedom is the huge wall dedicated to 70 key black achievers past and present. As expected, Muhammad Ali, Sojourner Truth, Wole Soyinka, Olaudah Equiano, Derek Walcott and so on are all there – and some names I didn't know, such as Gaspar Yanga, the Afro-Mexican slave rebellion leader who established a Maroon colony that lasted 30 years in the 16th century. But what really caught my eye is the inclusion for the first time in my experience of so many black Britons – role models young people can still access, still converse with. Viv Anderson, the first black England international footballer – how many of us remember how huge that was? Benjamin Zephaniah, the wonderful poet, and a man of stature and integrity. John Conteh; I

remember watching him fight as a child. Archbishop John Sentamu, a magnificent, fearless man at the forefront of the fight for social justice, here and now. The writer and academic Caryl Phillips, whose plays and novels I would read with awe and fascination while at college. The list, gladly, goes on and on.

The museum admits that the list is incomplete, and names will be added. Let me offer a few: Baroness Amos, the first black Leader of the House of Lords; the mighty three MPs Bernie Grant, Diane Abbott and Paul Boateng, and the new wave of David Lammy, Adam Afriyie and Dawn Butler, and not forgetting Oona King. If there's anything to be learnt from the pain of our ancestors, is that power lies with the people – and their representatives.

But I'm just nit-picking. If just one young person can be inspired by the achievements of any of the people on this wall, the International Slavery Museum can call itself a

roaring success. Only one thing would make this joyous opening better; to be met at the entrance to this new world of knowledge by a young black Liverpudlian giving me a welcome that, 20 years ago, his father felt he could only give me in Toxteth.

*The International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, opens on 23 August (0151-478 4499;  
<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism>*

### **Muhammad Ali - Boxer, born 1942**

Widely considered to be the greatest athlete of all time. Not only did Ali dominate the world of boxing (the BBC and Sports Illustrated hailed him "Sportsman of the Century" in 1999), he was also a key figure in the civil-rights movement after refusing to fight in Vietnam because of how blacks were treated in America.

### **Shirley Bassey - Singer, born 1937**

Arguably the greatest Welsh singer of all time, Bassey is the only artist to perform three James Bond themes. The Cardiff-born diva

has recently made a popular revival (she was made a Dame in 2000) and can apparently count the Queen as a fan.

### **Steve Biko - Activist, 1946-77**

A leading campaigner against apartheid in South Africa and co-founder of the Black People's Convention, Biko suffered a fatal head injury while in police custody. Richard Attenborough turned Biko's struggle for equality into the feature film Cry Freedom.

### **Stokely Carmichael - Civil rights activist, 1941-98**

Born in Trinidad and Tobago, Carmichael moved to Harlem at 11. He was leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, bringing black students together to protest against segregation. One of the first activists to use the term "Black Power".

### **George Washington Carver - Botanist, 1864-1943**

Dubbed a "black Leonardo" by Time magazine, Carver – born into slavery himself

– developed revolutionary farming techniques that helped former slaves in Alabama become self-sufficient. His methods helped to restore the South after the Civil War.

### **Fred D'Aguiar - Writer, born 1960**

Poet, novelist and playwright, regarded as one of the great British writers of his generation. He focuses on the role of the immigrant in Britain, slavery, colonisation and his Guyanese and British heritage. His works have been translated into 12 languages.

### **Oscar D'Leon - Musician, born 1943**

Performing and recording for 30 years, D'Leon is a superstar in the world of salsa. Born in Venezuela, he started singing and performing while earning a living driving taxis. Partly due to his underprivileged background, he is an idol in his home country.

### **Viv Anderson - Footballer, born 1956**

Anderson went down in the history books in 1978 as the first black player to appear in a full international for England. He won the

European Cup twice with Nottingham Forest as well as domestic titles. In 1999, he was appointed MBE for services to football.

**Maurice Rupert Bishop - Politician, revolutionary, 1944-83**

Creator of the People's Revolutionary Government in Grenada, leader of a bloodless coup against the government and inspired by figures such as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. He was overthrown and assassinated by members of his own government.

**Maya Angelou - Author, poet, playwright, born 1928**

A great voice of black literature. Angelou's memoirs expose the difficulties of growing up as a black woman in St Louis. Her achievements are many and varied, and she was the first African-American woman admitted to the Directors Guild of America.

**Aimé Césaire - Writer, born 1913**

Born in Martinique, the co-founder of the literary and political movement Négritude is

one of the Caribbean's most popular writers. A campaigner against African colonies, Césaire also published *Une Tempête* in 1968, a radical adaptation of *The Tempest*.

**Susana Baca de la Colina - Singer, born 1944**

Baca has played a major role in the resurgence of Afro-Peruvian music. Inspired by the music she heard as a child, she has founded the Centro Experimental de Musica Negrocontinuo (Institute of the Black Continuum), dedicated to the genre.

**Learie Constantine - Cricketer, politician, lawyer, 1901-71**

One of the finest all-rounders in cricket, Constantine moved to England from the West Indies to play professionally. He became involved in politics, fighting discrimination. He was the first black Governor of the BBC and the first black life peer.

**Benedita da Silva - Politician, born 1942**

Born in a Brazilian shantytown, Benedita

Souza da Silva Sampaio is a key political figure, fighting for the rights of the underprivileged. In 1994, she became Brazil's first black woman Federal Senator, and she has served as Governor of the State of Rio de Janeiro.

**Frederick Douglass - Abolitionist, writer, statesman, 1818-95**

A former slave, Douglass became one of the primary abolitionists in America. His books and speeches focused on his experiences. He started *The North Star*, a newspaper edited and written by black people. He later campaigned for the rights of women.

**Kofi Annan - Diplomat, born 1938**

Annan was the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations. His role in working for global peace was recognised when he and the UN were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001. He helped to reform the UN and strengthen its peacekeeping abilities.

**John Archer - Campaigner, 1863-1923**

In 1913, John Archer was elected Mayor of

Battersea, the first person of African descent to reach such a position in the UK. An equality campaigner, he chaired the Pan-African Congress in London in 1921 and was president of the African Progress Union.

### **Paul Bogle - Cleric, 1822-65**

A hero in Jamaica, Bogle was a Baptist deacon who used his education and wealth to help the black community. He led the Morant Bay Rebellion, in which many were killed by British troops sent to quell the uprising. He was hung by the British.

### **John Conteh - Boxer, born 1951**

Boasting a record of 34 wins, one draw and four losses, John Conteh is considered one of the greatest ever English boxers. Born in Merseyside, he won the WBC Light Heavyweight Championship in 1974 and a gold medal at the 1970 Commonwealth Games.

### **William Cuffey - Activist, 1788-1870**

Cuffey was the son of a former slave and a

leading figure in the Chartist movement that opposed the imbalance of the distribution of wealth in Britain. The reformist movement is considered the first major working-class movement in the world.

### **Charles Drew - Scientist, 1904-50**

An African-American physician, he revolutionised the science – and politics – of blood transfusions. Along with developing blood storage techniques and improved means of transfusing, Drew opposed the practice of racial segregation in blood donation.

### **WEB Du Bois - Sociologist, activist, 1868-1963**

The first African American to gain a PhD from Harvard, Du Bois wrote several studies on American black society. He later became a key figure in the civil rights movement and co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

### **Bussa - Slave leader, died 1816**

A national hero of Barbados, Bussa led around 400 slaves in a revolt against slave owners in 1816. Although Bussa was killed in battle and the revolt failed, he is remembered as one of the key figures in the emancipation of the slaves.

### **Quince Duncan - Writer, born 1940**

The West Indian grew up under racial oppression in the Costa Rican city of San José. His fiction highlights the experiences of the black African in South America, and gained an international reputation as a human-rights leader promoting tolerance.

### **Gilberto Gil - Musician, born 1942**

A Grammy-award winning musician who sings about social activism, Gil is also Brazil's current minister of culture. He founded the Tropicalia movement in the 1960s and was treated as a political threat by the Brazilian government of the time.

### **Félix Eboué - Politician, 1884-1944**

Eboué became the first black man to be appointed governor in the French colonies, in Guadeloupe; as governor of Chad, he joined the Free French in their struggle against the Nazis and persuaded other French-African countries to follow.

### **Pastor G Daniel Ekarte - Minister, social activist, 1896-1964**

Pastor Ekarte founded the African Churches Mission in Liverpool which, from 1945-1949, looked after "brown babies": the unwanted offspring of black American GIs and the city's white women. Hundreds of residents lined the streets for his funeral.

### **Nicolás Guillé\* - Poet, 1902-89**

A leading figure of "poesia égra" ("black poetry"), the Afro-Cuban poet, writer and journalist was also an influential campaigner for social justice. His work examines what it was like to be poor and black in Cuba.

## **Roi Ankhkara Kwabena - Cultural anthropologist, born 1956**

Born in Trinidad, Kwabena – who calls himself a "cultural activist" – produces art on a variety of platforms, addressing issues such as racism and immigration. He is a poet, musician, storyteller, historian and publisher, and has performed around the world.

## **Lewis Howard Latimer - Inventor, 1848-1928**

The son of escaped slaves, Latimer is considered one of the greatest black inventors, notably due to his improvement of carbon filaments in light bulbs. He worked with Thomas Edison and Alexander Bell and secured many different patents.

## **Sir William Arthur Lewis - Economist, 1915-91**

In 1979, Sir Arthur Lewis became the first black person to win the Nobel Prize for Economics. He advised major nations around the world while his research on economic

development in emerging countries was pioneering.

### **Toussaint-L'Ouverture - Rebel slave leader, 1743-1803**

Born a slave in Haiti (then the French colony of St Dominique), Toussaint successfully led a slave rebellion against the colonisers. A brilliant general, he went on to help France drive out the British and Spanish from the country.

### **Patrice Lumumba - Politician, activist, 1925-1961**

An African anti-colonial activist, Lumumba played a major role in gaining the Democratic Republic of the Congo's independence from Belgium, and was elected its first Prime Minister. He was assassinated after an army-supported coup.

### **Toni Morrison - Author, born 1931**

In 1988, Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved*, won the Pulitzer Prize; five years later, she became the first black woman to win the Nobel Prize

for Literature. She acts as a mentor for many writers and is on the editorial board of The Nation magazine.

### **Nanny - Maroon leader, active 1720-34**

A national heroine of Jamaica, Queen Nanny was a famous Maroon leader who frequently attacked British troops and is believed to have freed hundreds of slaves. A symbol of Maroon resistance, she is thought to have been killed by British forces.

### **Kwame Nkrumah - Politician, 1909-72**

The first President of Ghana, Nkrumah led the movement that gained independence from Britain in 1957. An influential Pan-Africanist, he believed in uniting Africa under one government. He died in exile after his government was overthrown in 1966.

### **Jesse Owens - Athlete, 1913-80**

At the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Owens defied Nazi propaganda and won four gold medals on the track. When he died, the US President Jimmy Carter said: "Perhaps no athlete better

symbolised the human struggle against tyranny, poverty and racial bigotry."

**George Padmore - Scholar, activist, 1902-59**

Padmore is seen as one of the 20th century's greatest social theorists and played a large role in the decolonisation of the Caribbean and Africa. A prominent Pan-Africanist, he inspired many black leaders and established the International African Service Bureau.

**Philip Emeagwali - Scientist, born 1954**

A winner of the Gordon Bell prize in 1989, the Nigerian-born computer scientist and geologist is a symbol of African achievement. Emeagwali, voted the 35th greatest African of all time in *The New African*, played a role in the birth of the internet.

**Olaudah Equiano - Writer, explorer, 1745-97**

Equiano's autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, is one of the

most important works to address abolition. A former slave who bought his freedom, he toured the UK talking about his experiences.

### **Frantz Fanon - Writer, psychiatrist, 1925-61**

Born in the French colony of Martinique, Fanon's writing highlights violence as the only method by which colonial repression can be overturned. His work had a great influence across America and Europe and inspired numerous civil rights activists.

### **Marcus Garvey - Civil rights activist, 1887-1940**

Garvey became an inspiration for future civil rights activists by travelling across America urging African-Americans to be proud of their heritage and to return to the continent. He founded the Black Star Shipping Line and United Negro Improvement Association.

### **Howard Gayle - Footballer, born 1958**

When he became the first black footballer to play for Liverpool in 1977, Gayle was seen as

a trailblazer in a sport that was almost all white. His pride in his background led him to being labelled as a troublemaker; today he campaigns against racism in football.

### **Kelly Holmes - Athlete, born 1970**

Holmes became the first British woman to win two gold medals after winning both the 800m and 1,500m at the 2004 Athens Olympics. She was named BBC Sports Personality of the Year in 2004 and made a dame in 2005.

### **Jaime Hurtado - Politician, died 1999**

Hurtado founded Ecuador's Democratic Popular Movement, a political party that fought for the welfare of the working classes. He was the first Afro-Ecuadorian to be elected to Congress and the first to run for President. He was assassinated in 1999.

### **CLR James - Writer, socialist theorist, 1901-89**

James is famous for seminal writings both on cricket and colonialism, most notably his

book *The Black Jacobins*. He campaigned for African and West Indian independence, and wrote the first novel by a Caribbean author to be published in the UK.

### **Jamaica Kincaid - Writer, born 1949**

The celebrated African-American author also teaches creative writing at Harvard University. She left Antigua to escape her family's lack of ambition for her, and often writes about the country's narrow-minded nature and the effects of British colonialism.

### **Martin Luther King - Civil rights activist, 1929-68**

The figurehead of the American Civil Rights Movement, King became a national hero after leading the successful Montgomery bus boycott. In 1964 he received the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his work. He was assassinated on 4 April 1968.

### **Miriam Makeba - Musician, activist, born 1932**

Known as "Mama Africa", Makeba became

one of the first musicians to bring African music to the rest of the world. She was exiled by the South African government in 1960 after speaking out against apartheid in an address at the United Nations.

### **Nelson Mandela - Political activist, born 1918**

A key anti-apartheid figure in South Africa, Mandela spent 27 years in prison for the cause. After his release, he became the country's first fully democratically elected president and leader of the African National Congress. In 1993 he won the Nobel Peace Prize.

### **Bob Marley - Musician, 1945-81**

Bob Marley brought reggae to a worldwide audience, and is a hero in Jamaica as well as being seen by many Rastafarians as a prophet. His albums and shows with his band, The Wailers, were legendary. In 1978 he was awarded the United Nations' Medal of Peace.

### **Trevor McDonald - Journalist, born 1939**

The first black news anchor in the UK,

Trinidad-born McDonald is one of the most popular figures on TV. Starting his career on the BBC World Service, in 1999 he was given the Bafta Richard Dimbleby Award for Outstanding Contribution to Television.

### **Vicente Ferreira Pastinha - Martial arts master, 1889-1981**

Pastinha is a mestre, or master, of Capoeira, the Afro-Brazilian martial art. Capoeira was brought to Brazil by African slaves and was illegal in the country from 1888 to the 1930s. Pastinha opened the first Capoeira Angola school in the Brazil in 1942.

### **Rosa Parks - Activist, 1913-2005**

Parks's refusal to give up her seat on an Alabama bus in 1955 became a symbolic moment in the American civil rights movement. The fallout launched Martin Luther King Jr to fame. The incident sparked a mass boycott of the transport system by the black community.

### **Pelé - Footballer, born 1940**

Christened Edson Arantes do Nascimento Pelé, he is regarded as the world's greatest footballer. Playing for his native Brazil, Pelé won the World Cup three times. In 1999 the BBC named him the second greatest sportsman of the millennium.

### **Caryl Phillips - Author, born 1958**

A novelist and writer for TV, radio, theatre and cinema, Phillips has often focused on the slave trade, and in 2004 he was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Born in St Kitts and brought up in Leeds, he is now a professor of English at Yale.

### **Walter Rodney - Academic, political leader, 1942-80**

Born in Guyana, Rodney was a leading Pan-Africanist and Black Power leader. When he became a member of the Working People's Alliance in Guyana, he became a major figure in the resistance against the repressive government and was assassinated by a bomb.

## **Ignatius Sancho - Writer, composer, 1729-80**

Perhaps most notable for being the first black Briton to vote in a UK election, he was also the first African author to have his work published in this country. Sancho wrote poetry, plays, composed music and became friends with the writer Samuel Johnson.

## **Haile Selassie - World leader, 1892-1975**

Accepted by Rastafarians as a symbol of God incarnate, the former emperor of Ethiopia became a worldwide anti-Fascist figure after appealing to the United Nations for help against Mussolini's invading armies. An ally of the west and opponent of colonisation.

## **Léopold Sédar Senghor - Politician, poet, 1906-2001**

A poet as well as a leading figure in African politics, Senghor is one of the greatest African intellectuals of the 20th century. The first president of Senegal, he was also the co-

founder of Négritude and has been credited with the relative political stability of Senegal.

**John Sentamu - Religious leader, born 1949**

The 97th Archbishop of York – and the first black man to serve as an Anglican archbishop – Sentamu has often spoken out on many topical issues and chaired the inquiry into how the police handled the death of Damilola Taylor.

**Sam Sharpe - Preacher, 1801-32**

Sharpe, a Jamaican national hero, was born a slave in Montego Bay and became a Baptist preacher. In 1931 he led the Christmas Rebellion, the last major uprising in Jamaica before slavery was abolished, for which he was executed by British forces.

**Bessie Smith - Singer, 1892-1937**

"The Empress of the Blues" was the first blues singer to achieve success as a recording artist. She has influenced countless artists, including Janis Joplin, Billie Holiday and Nina

Simone, and played alongside such greats as Louis Armstrong.

### **Mary Seacole - Nurse, 1805-81**

Seacole rose to prominence during the Crimean War when she funded her own journey to Turkey after British authorities refused her offers of help. There she opened a hospital, and became a popular figure in Britain, receiving various awards for bravery.

### **Wole Soyinka - Poet, writer, playwright, born 1934**

One of the leading writers in Africa, Soyinka won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. His work often concentrates on oppression and tyranny. He has also played a huge role in Nigerian politics and was imprisoned in 1967 during the country's civil war.

### **Ali Ibrahim 'Farka' Touré - Musician, 1939-2006**

Dubbed " the African John Lee Hooker", Touré lived in Mali until his death from cancer. Winner of two Grammys, he was one

of Africa's most famous musicians and always insisted that the blues was an authentically African genre.

**Sojourner Truth - Civil rights campaigner, 1797-1883**

Born into slavery in New York, Truth became a prominent abolitionist. Alongside memorable speeches such as "Ain't I a Woman?" she released an autobiography of her time as a slave. She also campaigned for woman's rights and against capital punishment.

**Harriet Tubman - Abolitionist, 1820-1913**

A runaway slave, Tubman went on to aid the escape of hundreds of slaves via the Underground Railroad, a network of houses willing to help those on their way to freedom in Canada. Nicknamed "Moses", she later served in the Civil War.

**Archbishop Desmond Tutu - Cleric, campaigner, born 1931**

A key figure in the overthrow of apartheid in South Africa, Tutu was chosen by President

Mandela to chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In 1975 he became the first black Anglican Dean of Johannesburg, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985.

**Derek Walcott - Playwright, author, artist, born 1930**

Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, Walcott's poems and plays are largely influenced by growing up in the former British colony of St Lucia. Dividing his time between America and the Caribbean, much of his work addresses cultural differences between two cultures.

**Arthur Wharton - Footballer, 1865-1930**

Best known as the first professional black footballer in the English League, Wharton also excelled at cycling, cricket and running. In 1886 he became the fastest man in Britain. In 2004 he was inducted into the English Football Hall of Fame.

**Phillis Wheatley - Poet, 1753-1784**

Captured by slave traders in Senegal as a child,

Wheatley became the first black female author to have a book of poetry published in America. Supported by members of the Boston gentry, she became a literary sensation and appeared before George Washington.

**Oprah Winfrey - Media tycoon, born 1954**

A living American institution, she is seen by some as the most influential woman in the world. At the centre of her various projects is her TV chat show which is syndicated around the world. In 2006 Winfrey became the world's first black woman billionaire.

**Malcolm X - Civil rights activist, 1925-65**

Malcolm X was a major campaigner for black power and opposed the idea of racial equality. A believer in militant protest, he was assassinated not long after leaving the Nation of Islam and creating the Organization of Afro-American Unity.

**Gaspar Yanga - Rebel slave leader, 1570-1609**

The leader of a slave revolt in Mexico that led

to the creation of a slave colony in the mountains which, with a population of around 500, existed for more than 30 years. After violent clashes, Yanga obtained a treaty that gave the slaves their freedom.

### **Benjamin Zephaniah - Poet, born 1958**

Zephaniah decided to become a poet after being sent to prison, aged 14. He is now one of Britain's top contemporary poets and has also written novels. He publicly rejected an OBE in 2003 because the award reminded him of "thousands of years of brutality".

### ***Have your say***

The Greatest Black Achievers list was compiled by a committee from the International Slavery Museum chaired by its head, Dr Richard Benjamin.

A long list was compiled from names proposed by committee members, who are all curators at the museum, and who nominated individuals from their own areas of expertise.

"Our main criterion was to make sure we got a real mix," Benjamin says. "We want the exhibition to give a real idea of how wide the area of black achievers is. We believe the people we have chosen are a good indicator."

The list now has 76 names, but it will change over time with the help of museum visitors and Independent readers. "We are hoping that visitors will make suggestions. We could have someone like [Grand Prix driver] Lewis Hamilton up there soon.

"Part of the idea is that visitors will learn about people they don't recognise. We believe the museum and the list will fight racism and challenge stereotypical views. We want it to highlight the resistance of the African people and show that they weren't passive in the slave trade."