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# Darwin and slavery

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Activity 4: Who was involved in the transatlantic slave trade?

Subject: History

2 x 45 minutes

## Suggested preparation

Presentation:

[Darwin and slavery](#)

## What do I need?

[Letter 3927](#) Charles Darwin to Asa Gray, 19 January [1863]

[Letter questions](#)

[Map and images of the slave trade](#)

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What was the scale, significance and legacy of the slave trade? Through looking at the production and transportation of raw materials and finished goods we can understand more about the economic impact of slavery and how it survived for so long. Darwin's letter to his close friend Asa Gray reveals how the issue of slavery deeply divided America.

## What do I do?

1. Read Darwin's letter to Asa Gray and answer the letter questions.
2. Look at the map of the triangular trade route and the images. Discuss how slavery functioned. How were people from Britain, America and Africa involved?
3. Look closely at the paintings of the sugar plantation and factory. What else besides slave labour would be needed for cultivation and for the production of sugar?
4. Look at the painting of Liverpool docks. What jobs and products can you see that contributed to the functioning of the slave trade? (e.g. rope makers and rope for the ships).
5. Look at other products mentioned on the map. Make a list of what, and who, was needed to produce them.

## Letter 3927 Charles Darwin to Asa Gray, 19 January [1863]

Jan 19th  
Down Bromley Kent

My dear Gray

...Well, your President has issued his fiat against Slavery— God grant it may have some effect.— I fear it is true that very many English do not now really care about Slavery; I heard some old sensible people saying here the same thing; & they accounted for it (& such a contrast it is to what I remember in my Boy-hood) by the present generation never having seen or heard much about Slavery.— I sometimes cannot help taking most gloomy view about your future. I look to your money depreciating so much that there will be mutiny with your soldiers & quarrels between the different states which are to pay. In short anarchy & then the South & Slavery will be triumphant. But I hope my dismal prophecies will be as utterly wrong as most of my other prophecies have been. But everyone's prophecies have been wrong; those of your Government as wrong as any.— It is a cruel evil to the whole world; I hope that you may prove right & good come out of it.— Do not trouble or tire yourself to write to me,—though I never receive a letter from you without real pleasure & kind instruction.—



Farewell

Yours most sincerely

C. Darwin



## Letter questions

1. What American historical event is Darwin writing to Asa Gray about?  
Why does Darwin support the American President's position?
2. Why does Darwin say people in England no longer care about slavery?  
What had changed by the time this letter was written compared to when Darwin was young?
3. What does Darwin fear might be the outcome of the American Civil war?  
Why is he afraid of this outcome?

# Images



Transatlantic slave map



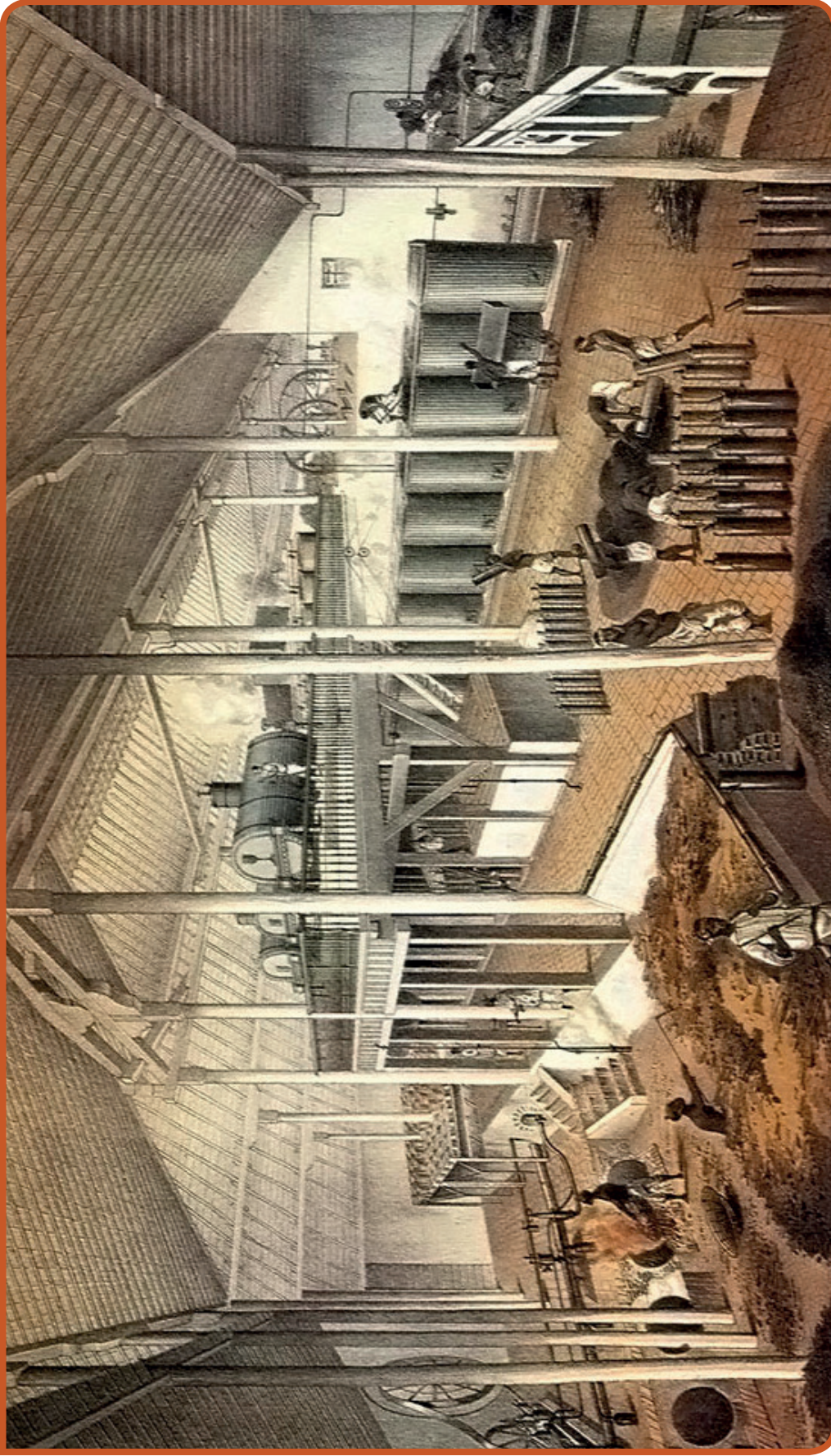
# Images



Liverpool Docks Customs House and Salthouse Docks, Liverpool (oil on canvas)

Grimshaw, John Atkinson (1836-93), NUL 166670 / Private Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library



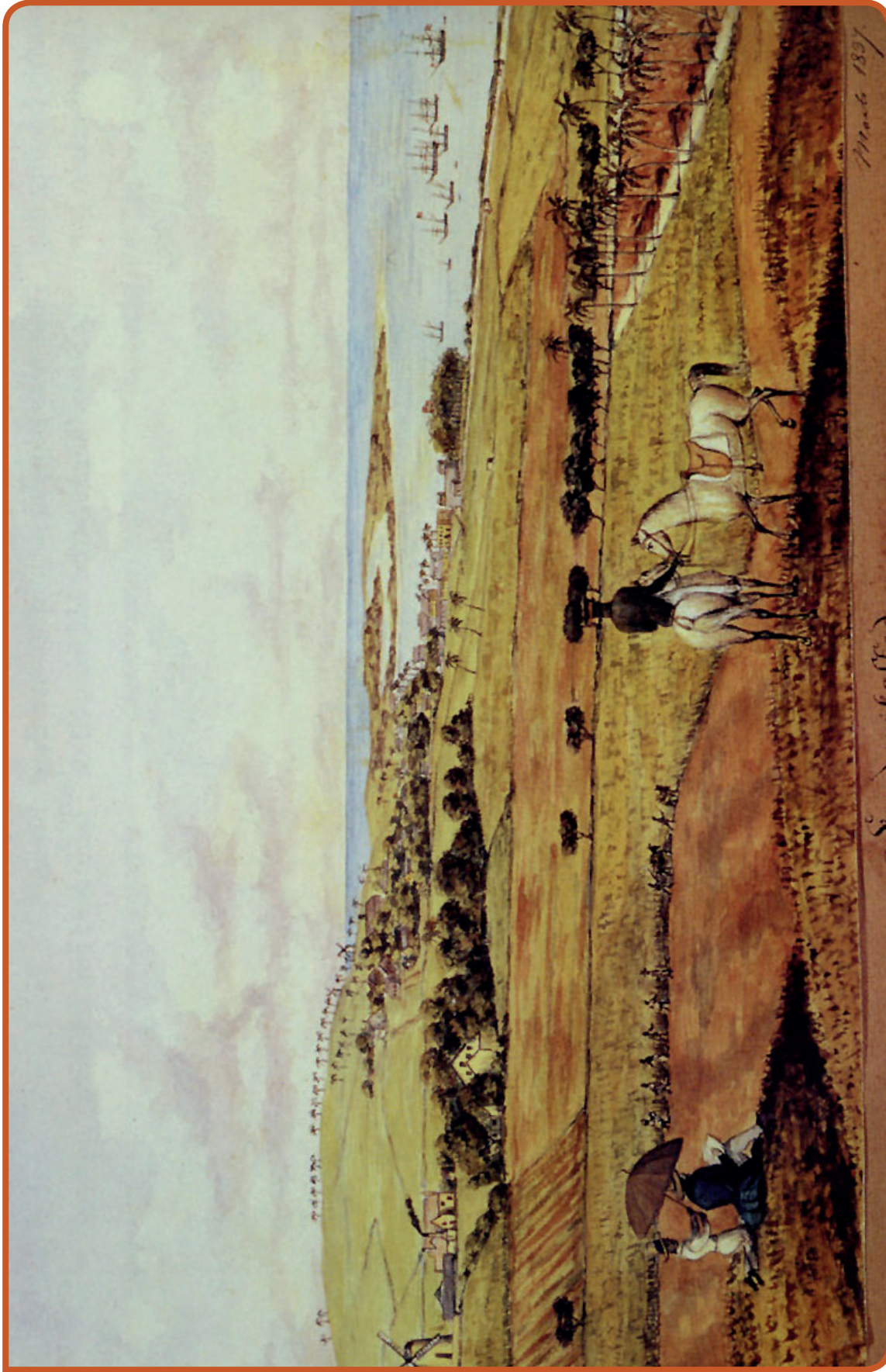


**Sugar Factory, Plantation Asuncion, Cuba, 1857**

Image reference: Cantero2, Source: Justo German Cantero, *Los ingenios: coleccion de vistas de los principales ingenios de azucar de la Isla de Cuba* (Havana, 1857), as shown on [www.slaveryimages.org](http://www.slaveryimages.org), compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.



# Images



Sugar Plantation, St. Croix, Danish West Indies, ca. 1840

Image reference: NW0040, Source: Published in *Leif Svalesen, The Slave Ship Fredensborg*, as shown on [www.slaveryimages.org](http://www.slaveryimages.org), compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.