

Dido Elizabeth Lindsay Belle and the Beginnings of Abolition

In the late 18th century, Britain led the way in the major industry of slavery, which although it did not invent, it did industrialise to an extent never seen before in human history. However, the idea that the enslavement of human beings and the dehumanising to the status of animals was in fact wrong was just beginning to take hold of the consciences of some people in England at this time.

This lecture will trace the Beginnings of Abolition through the eyes of Dido Elizabeth Belle a black woman living in Kenwood House in the late 18th century, and the only known portrait of her painted by the German, but London based Neo-classical painter Johann Zoffany (1733-1810). What made her so different from other blacks living in London at this time, how did Dido come to live at such a grand house at the height of slavery in Britain, what exactly was her status and how was she treated?

In the light of these fundamental questions, this lecture will take us back in time on a journey that will not only look at the image of Dido, but will also look at a variety of images by artists such as Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) and Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851). These artists and their paintings will be seen in the context of abolition, the changing social attitudes towards the industry of slavery, and the first stirrings of the Anti-Slavery movement in Britain.

Short Reading list:

Dabydeen, David, Gilmore, John and Jones, Cecily, ***The Oxford Companion to Black British History*** (Oxford University Press, 2007)

Gerzina, Gretchen, ***Black England: Life before Emancipation*** (John Murray, 1995)

Various authors, ***A History of the Black Presence in London***, (Greater London Council, 1986)

Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa (autobiography), ***The Interesting Narrative of the Life of, the African***, (first published, 1789)