

Mary Prince

Mary Prince was one of numerous women who supported the campaign to abolish Slavery. Much of what is known about her comes from an account of her life, *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* which was published in London in 1831. Mary is the only enslaved West Indian woman to leave an account of her life. Her story highlights the important contribution of women who took a stand against the mistreatment of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the British West Indies and across the Americas. Her story has been illustrated with images from Royal Museum Greenwich's wider collection.



These activities, and the information supporting them, use the life of **Mary Prince** to introduce you to the story of how slavery came to be abolished in Britain, following the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade over a quarter of a century earlier. As you follow the trail (see p.8) you will be invited to:

- visit our galleries and explore our online collections to see objects that will help bring Mary's story to life
- weigh up some of the decisions that Mary may have faced on her journey from enslavement to freedom
- answer some questions to test your general knowledge

This pamphlet has been written for visitors to the National Maritime Museum by Stella Dadzie. Stella is a British black feminist historian and education activist, best known for her co-authorship of *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*. Her latest book, *A Kick in the Belly: Women, Slavery & Resistance* (Verso, 2020) explores how enslaved women 'kicked back' against enslavement.



The image of Mary Prince is the work of Shaun Campbell. This is an artist's realisation. No images survive of Mary Prince herself.

How much do you know about the campaign to abolish slavery?

Circle your answers...

1. By what name was the famous African abolitionist Olaudah Equiano also known?
 a) Ignatius Sancho b) Ottobah Cugnano c) Gustavus Vassa
2. Which of these English women campaigned to abolish the transatlantic slave trade?
 a) Hannah More b) Hannah Murray c) Hannah Montana
3. What year was the transatlantic slave trade abolished, outlawing the transport of captives from Africa?
 a) 1807 b) 1825 c) 1834
4. Between 1826 and 1832, how many petitions were put before parliament calling for the abolition of slavery itself?
 a) over 35 b) over 350 c) over 3,500
5. What year did Britain finally abolish slavery in its overseas colonies?
 a) 1814 b) 1824 c) 1834
6. What year did the United States of America finally abolish slavery?
 a) 1805 b) 1865 c) 1895
7. How much compensation was paid to Britain's former slave-owners when slavery was abolished?
 a) £10 million b) £20 million c) £30 million
8. What is the equivalent of this sum in today's money?
 a) £1 million b) £10 million c) £17 billion
9. What year did British taxpayers finish paying off this debt?
 a) 2015 b) 1925 c) 1875

Mary Prince

1788 – 1833 (?)

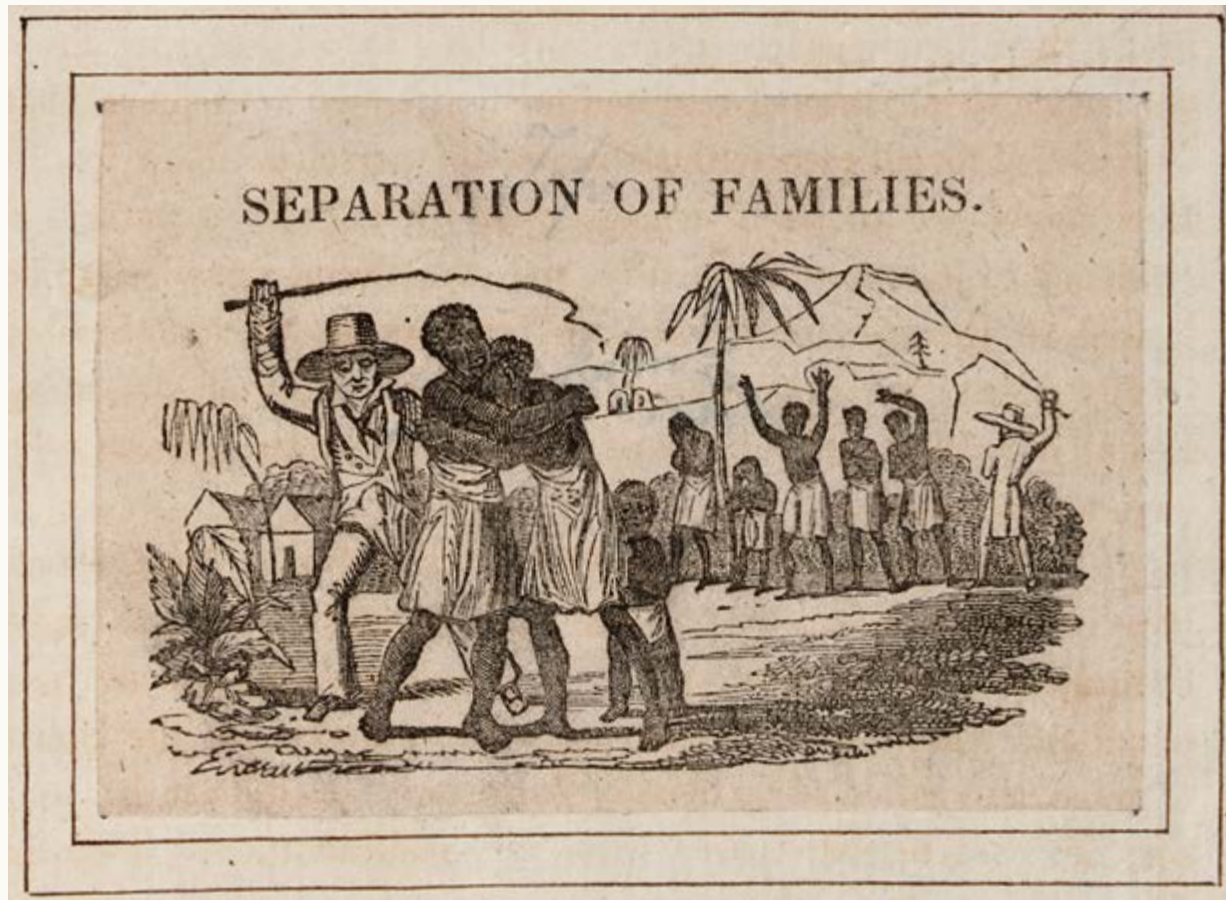
'I have been a slave myself... I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me. The man that says slaves be quite happy in slavery—that they don't want to be free—that man is either ignorant or a lying person. I never heard a slave say so.'

(The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave Related by Herself, University of Michigan Press, 1997)

Mary Prince was born in Bermuda in 1788, in the parish of Devonshire. Her mother Susannah worked as a house slave. Her father, a sawyer named Prince, was owned by a different master. Soon after Mary was born, she and her mother were sold to Captain George Darrel, who gave Mary to his granddaughter as a slave-companion.

Mary spent her early life as the playmate of her young mistress. *'I was made quite a pet of by Miss Betsey, and loved her very much. She used to lead me about by the hand, and call me her little n—r.'* Too young to understand her enslaved condition, Mary describes these years as the happiest period of her life.

At the age of twelve, Mary and her two younger sisters were sold to cover the cost of her master's wedding. Led by her mother to the auction, Mary soon found herself roughly handled and sold to the highest bidder. Mary watched as her sisters were led away by their new owners. *'It was a sad parting,'* she recalled. *'One went one way, one another, and my poor mammy went home with nothing.'*



This engraving was cut from a book and shows an enslaved family saying a final farewell as they are sold to different owners (ZBA2515)

Mary's new owners, Captain Ingham and his wife, treated her badly. As a nursemaid to their young son, she was tasked with all aspects of his care. Despite her young age, she was also expected to do the laundry, cooking and cleaning. She was often worked

long into the night to the point of exhaustion. Frequently whipped, she soon came to know *'the exact difference between the smart of the rope, the cartwhip and the cowskin when applied to my naked body.'*

If you were Mary, what would you have done?

Tried to escape?	Feigned illness?	Accepted your fate?
This meant almost certain recapture, possibly with deadly consequences.	This meant risking another flogging as 'malingering' was seen as evidence of laziness.	This meant putting up with daily abuse from both the master and mistress.

What did Mary decide to do?

Like countless other enslaved people, Mary chose to escape. She ran back to her mother, who hid her and brought her food. When her father found out, he took Mary back to her owners, hoping they would be lenient towards her, but his pleas for them to treat his young daughter less harshly were ignored.



This 19th C wood engraving shows the flogging of an enslaved woman called Rosa who, like Hetty, also lost her unborn child.. Rosa's ordeal was presented to Parliament in 1828 as evidence to support of the abolition of Slavery. (ZBA2555).

Mary endured this harsh treatment for another five years. She witnessed appalling cruelty, including the flogging of a fellow slave called Hetty who was heavily pregnant. Hetty's death, following the loss of her unborn baby, affected Mary badly. She also had to take on Hetty's work as a cowherd and milkmaid on top of her other chores.

In 1806, when her owners had no further use for her, they sent her to work in the salt ponds on Grand Turk Island, where she was sold again. Mary spent the next ten years forced to work hard under the hot sun, often knee-deep in salt water. She suffered greatly from boils on her feet and was often stripped naked and hung up by her wrists to be flogged.

Eventually she returned with her master to Bermuda where she was responsible for the upkeep of his house. As well as planting and hoeing, tending the cow and grooming his horse, Mr D— also *'had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked and ordering me to wash him in a tub of water,'* which she describes as *'worse to me than all the licks.'*



This 1827 watercolour shows an enslaved woman with a child on her back carrying a basket of washing (ZBA2747)

But Mary was a fighter. She intervened when she discovered her master beating his daughter in a drunken rage. She also tried to defend herself. After running away, she was hired out to work as a washerwoman. Her wages were paid to her master, yet she found ways to put money aside. Her plan was to save enough money to purchase her freedom.

Eventually, Mary persuaded her master to hire her out to a Mr and Mrs Wood who took her with them to Antigua. The Woods went on to buy her but when rheumatism left her unable to do her work to their satisfaction, she was repeatedly flogged. Despite her owners' complaints, Mary was no malingeringer. They often left her in charge of the household when they travelled.

Mary exploited every opportunity to add to her meagre savings, hiring herself out as a washerwoman and selling the pigs and coffee she bought for a small profit. A lifetime of abuse had not stopped her dreaming of better future, prompting her mistress to ask who had put freedom into her head. Mary's reply was unambiguous. 'To be free is very sweet.' Her decision to attend church one Christmas led to Mary's baptism by Moravian missionaries, (German Protestants who believed strongly in spreading the word of God amongst the enslaved). She also married Daniel James, a free black man who earned his living as a cooper and carpenter. Frustrated by the constraints slavery imposed on her marriage, and her owners' growing vindictiveness, Mary made several attempts to purchase her freedom, but the Woods refused. When they announced plans to visit Britain where slavery was said to be outlawed, Mary agreed to go with them, believing they would have no choice but to free her. Mary arrived in London in 1828.

If you were Mary, what would you have done?

Jumped ship on arrival in Britain?	Continued to save for your freedom?	Joined forces with others opposed to slavery?
As a black woman in a strange, new country, Mary would have been easily exploited – and easily found.	Mary's owners consistently refused to sell her. She might have waited a very long time.	This would have meant abandoning her owners and throwing herself on the mercy of strangers

What did Mary decide to do?

After a long battle with the Woods, Mary called their bluff and walked out. She was helped by fellow Moravians, who took her to the Anti-Slavery Society for assistance.

Despite ten years of loyal service, Mary's relationship with the Woods grew increasingly difficult. Her deteriorating health was dismissed as an excuse to shirk her duties. After she complained about her unreasonable workload, they threatened to throw her out onto the street. Mary found her way to the Moravian church in Hatton Garden, where she was kindly received. She found shelter with a man called Mash and his wife, and used the little she was able to earn as a charwoman and laundress to pay towards her upkeep. Not long afterwards, she was introduced to Thomas Pringle, Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, who agreed to employ her.



This silver medallion depicts an African woman chained at the wrists before the figure of Justice. It is one of numerous items used by Abolitionists to promote public awareness of the case for abolishing Slavery. (ZBA2811).

It was during her time in Pringle's household that Mary narrated her story. A house guest of his, Susanna Strickland, wrote it down word for word, although it is possible some parts were edited so as not to offend British sensibilities at the time. *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* was into its third edition by the end of 1831, the year it was published. It ends with Mary's impassioned plea for abolition:

'This is slavery. I tell it to let English people know the truth; and I hope they will never leave off to pray God, and call loud to the great King of England, till all the poor blacks be given free, and slavery done up for evermore.'

Mary's account of the horrors of slavery fuelled abolitionist demands and incited furious public debate. Twice she appeared in court as a witness to defend her account against accusations she had exaggerated her mistreatment and sullied Wood's reputation. Mary petitioned Parliament to grant her freedom, which was denied. Meanwhile her friends continued to plead with the Woods to allow her to return to her husband in Antigua as a free woman.

If you were Mary, what would you have done?

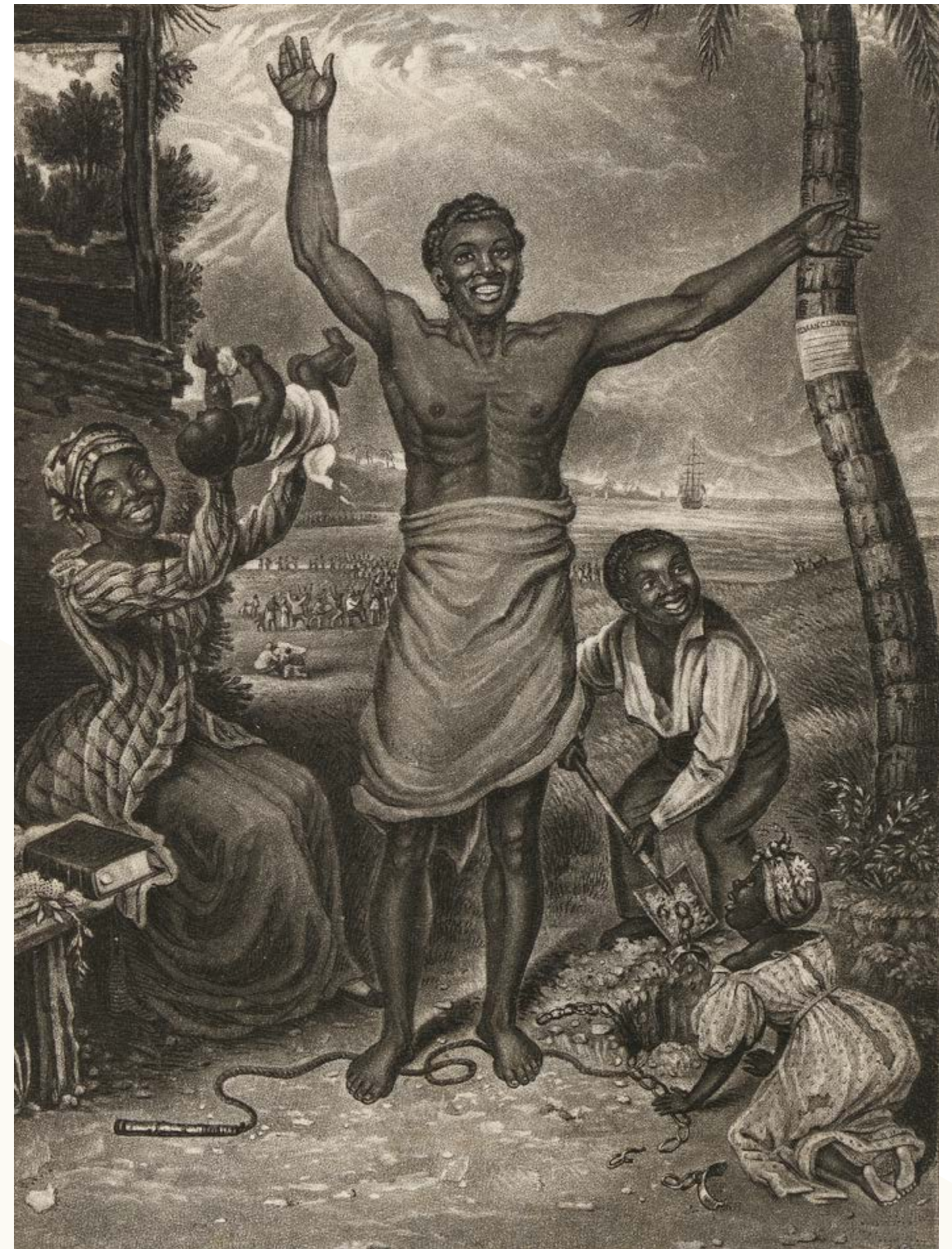
Returned to life as a slave in Antigua?	Stayed in Britain as a domestic servant?
Although she would have been reunited with her husband, this would have meant resuming her life as a slave with little hope of ever being freed	Mary's deteriorating health, including the loss of her eyesight, would have made it hard for her to survive in domestic service.

What did Mary decide to do?

Unable to persuade the Woods to free her, Mary refused to return to a life of enslavement.

Mary had little choice but to remain in Britain, technically free yet dependent on the good will of members of her church and fellow abolitionists for her day to day survival. There is no evidence that she ever returned to Antigua. Apart from encroaching blindness, her fate after she appeared as a witness in court is not known. It seems likely she spent the remainder of her life in London. She died in obscurity, possibly as early as 1833. She would have been forty-three years old.

Mary Prince was the first black woman in Britain to speak out against the injustice of slavery. Hers is just one example of the many different ways enslaved women found to bring about slavery's demise.



This image depicts an enslaved family celebrating the Abolition of Slavery on August 1st 1834. (ZBA2783)



In the museum, you will find thousands of incredible objects that tell the stories of people and their connections to the sea. Use this trail to discover some of these amazing objects and record your journey.

Follow the trail...

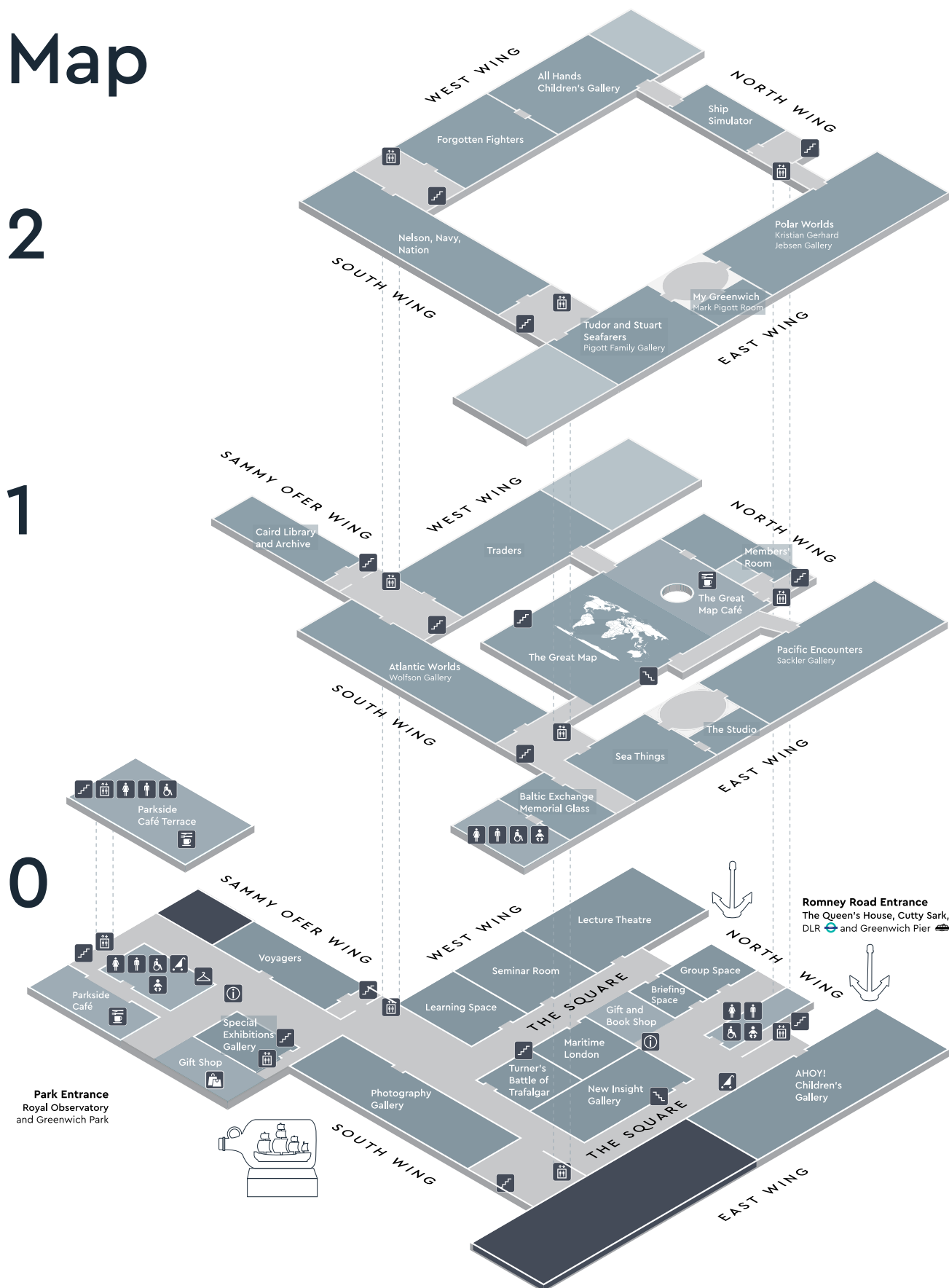
1. To begin your tour, make your way to the Great Map.
Can you find the part of the world where Mary was born?
2. To find out whether you were right, head to the Forgotten Fighters Gallery.
Can you find a wall map that shows the island of Bermuda?
3. Now make your way to the Atlantic Worlds Gallery.
Can you find two or more of the following...
 - A whip made of animal hide that would have been used to flog enslaved people? [ZBA2483]
 - An abolitionist poem that uses the voice of west indian planters to detail the horrors of slavery? [ZBA2780]
 - A portrait of the abolitionist Olaudah Equiano? [ZBA2657]
 - An example of abolitionist propoganda printed on a plate? [ZBA2469]
4. Now make your way to the Sea Things Gallery and click on the campaigning to end slavery option on the middle screen.
Can you find a collection of glass seals and other items used by abolitionists to promote their cause? [ZBA2461]
5. Finally, make your way to the Maritime London Gallery.
Can you find a map of London as it would have looked when Mary arrived here in 1828?
Can you identify a famous monument on the map which was under construction when Mary lived in London?*
6. **Can you identify a famous monument on the map which was under construction when Mary lived in London?***

Map

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* Nelson's Column, built between 1840 and 1843

WANT TO FIND OUT MORE?

Scan this QR code to find out more about Mary Prince



You will also find more information here about the Anti-Slavery Society and Slavery & the Slave Trade in general

RMG's online collections explorer enables you to view thousands of objects online and, if they have been digitized, to download images of them for free. Go to our website, click on 'Collections' and enter the object's unique reference number (e.g. ZBA2612) into the search engine:

<https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections>

The Caird Library & Archives contains a large collection of books and documents relating to the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

The Prince Phillip Maritime Collection Centre in Kidbrooke contains is where we store objects that are not currently on display in the museum's galleries. Use our website to book a tour or arrange to view a specific object.

For other enquiries, email
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