

GUILD NEWS: FITZWILLIAM DONATION PAYS FOR BAG CONSERVATION

The Fitzwilliam's major exhibition in 2025, provisionally entitled 'Voices of Change', will include a small bag made in the early 1800s, essentially as a publicity tool, by ladies in the movement to abolish slavery. The bag needed conserving before being put on display in the exhibition next year.

Our donation has enabled the museum to pay for this conservation work. We have received their thanks, along with a warm welcome to guild members to visit the exhibition next year and see the item for themselves.

About the bag:

T.1-2022: A very rare cotton work bag made by the Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro* Slaves to promote Abolitionism, printed en-grisaille with the scene of an enslaved African woman cradling an infant whilst being addressed by an African slave driver, whip in hand, the reverse inscribed with verse, circa 1835, 270 x 220mm

***Please note** that the term 'negro' was used historically to describe people of black African heritage but today it is considered offensive. It is used here in its original, historical context only.

Image:

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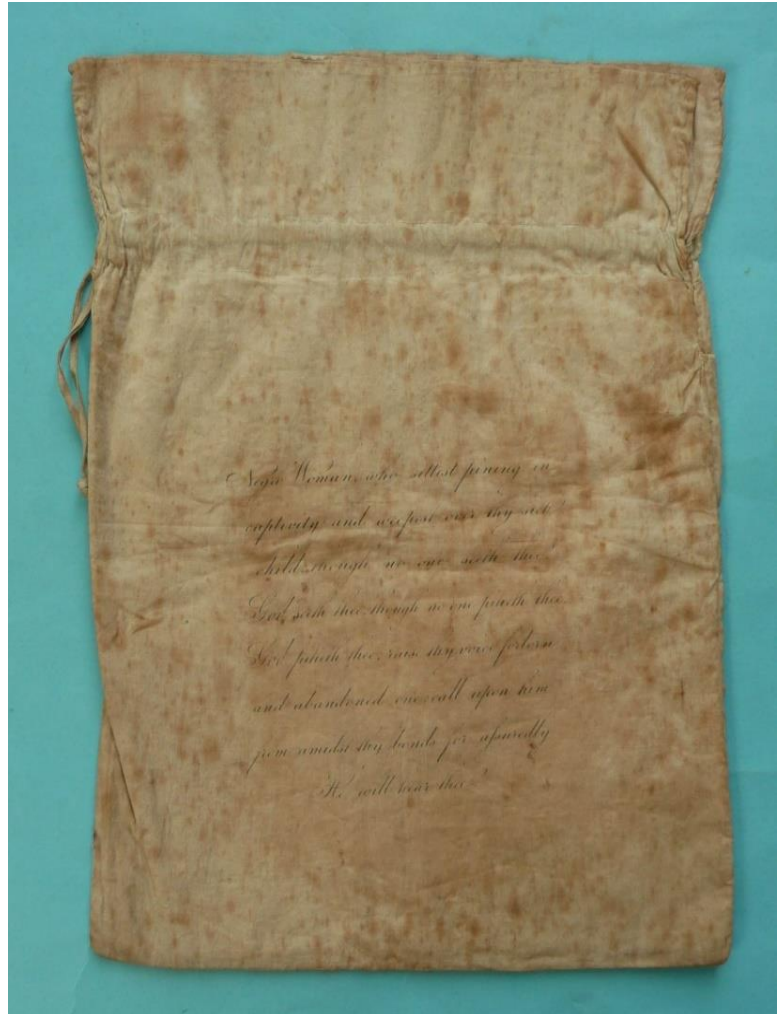
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Verse on reverse reads: 'Negro Woman, who sittest pining in / captivity and weepst over thy sick / child: though no one seeth thee, / God seeth thee; though no one pitieth thee, / God pitieth thee; raise thy voice forlorn / and abandoned one; call upon him / from amidst they bonds for assuredly / He will hear thee'

Although Britain's participation in the slave trade officially ended in 1807, slavery continued in the British Empire and in 1823 the Anti-Slavery Society was formed to campaign for the end of slavery. While women were allowed to join the society, they could not form part of its leadership, so a group of activist women in West Bromwich formed their own group in 1825, the Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves (later called the Female Society for Birmingham). Other similar female campaign groups were founded across Britain in the late 1820s to demand the immediate and full abolition of slavery in the colonies. Many of these groups produced objects decorated with abolitionist emblems, images and text, to decorate their homes, be worn in public to show allegiance and to be sold to raise funds for the cause.



Various types of bags were produced by female anti-slavery sewing circles: silk reticules in the novel form of the 'hand bag' were intended for the more wealthy (with an example in Saffron Walden Museum, and another in the V&A), while much cheaper, simpler cotton work bags (like the present example) were made for poorer women to buy. The image on the front of these bags could also vary with 4 or 5 standard designs, and this was also true of the extracted verses printed on the back. The image on the front of the present example is taken from a print by an unknown artist of *An enslaved mother in the West Indies with her child in her lap urged to work by the slave driver. 'The driver's whip unfolds its torturing evil'* usually dated to c. 1835, which provides a terminus post quem for the manufacture.

Whatever the materials and images and verses selected, these bags were often stuffed with campaign pamphlets and reports, newspaper cuttings and Anti-slavery poems, to disseminate information about the horrors of the slave trade and the treatment of enslaved people, and the arguments for Abolition. They distributed to prominent people, including King George IV and Princess Victoria, as well as to other women's anti-slavery societies. While presumably hundreds, if not thousands, of such bags were made, relatively few survive to this day and there are only a handful in museums in the UK.