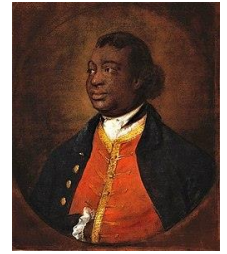


Ignatius Sancho Fact Sheet

Biography



Ignatius Sancho, 1768 –
Thomas Gainsborough,
(National Gallery of
Canada, Ottawa.)

- Ignatius Sancho was born on a slave ship going from West Africa to the Spanish Indies in the Caribbean. Both of his parents died soon after his birth.
- At the age of 2 he was brought to Greenwich, England and given to 3 maiden sisters as a slave.
- He was given the surname 'Sancho' as the sisters thought he looked like the servant of Don Quixote.
- The Duke of Montagu lived nearby in Greenwich and noticed Sancho's intelligence. So, under the Duke's watchful eye, Sancho was taught to read, write and maybe even play a musical instrument.
- However, the 3 ladies to whom Sancho was a slave disapproved of Sancho being educated as, *"ignorance was the best and only security for obedience"*
- At the age of 20 Sancho left the 3 ladies and begged the widowed Duchess of Montagu for a job (the Duke having recently died). Sancho became her **Butler**. He spent a lot of his time at the Montagu residence in Richmond. (See page 4&5 below for more detail of Sancho's time in Richmond.)
- After the Duchess died, Sancho was given his freedom and an annual pension of £30. This is the equivalent of £2,500 a year.
- Sancho went out into London a free man and tried to become an actor but he had a speech impediment that prevented this. He continued to enjoy theatre for the rest of this life, even writing a play.
- He made friends with actors and artists however he had quickly spent all of his money to went to the *new* Duke of Montagu for help.
- He became the assistant to the Duke's chaplain *then* became the Duke's valet. This was a significant position in the household and was known as the '*gentleman's gentleman*'.
- In 1758 he married Anne Osborne. Anne was a West Indian woman of African descent. They went on to have 7 children.
- In 1768 the Duke commissioned a portrait of Sancho by the artist Thomas Gainsborough.
- By 1773, Sancho was very ill with gout and also very overweight. The role of valet was a very demanding job. Using his savings and with help from the Duke, Sancho opened up a grocery shop in Westminster.
- Seeing as he now owned property, Sancho was eligible to vote in general elections. At the time only 3% of the population were eligible to vote. He was the first known Briton of African heritage to vote in an election.
- It was usual for writers and artists to pop in for a chat and have Sancho critique their work.
- He was a keen letter writer and would often go out and about to the theatre and Vauxhall pleasure gardens with his children.
- He was a brilliant musician. He published four collections of music during his lifetime, mostly songs and dances to be performed in private homes. He was the first published Black British composer that we know about. (See page 5 below for an example of his music)
- He died in 1780 and his friend, Mrs Frances Crewe, collected his letters and published them. The first edition has 1,200 subscribers and Anne Sancho received £500 from the profit. (See page 5 below for an example of his letters from Richmond)
- He received an obituary in the British press, the first Black man to do so.

(Research taken from 'Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780) Life and Times' ©Greenwich Education Service, 1998)

Suggested activities

- In a letter Sancho wrote he says “*ignorance was the best and only security for obedience*”. Get the students to discuss what they think this means and why slave owners wanted to keep enslaved people uneducated.
- Get students to discuss the significance of a Black man in the position of **butler** and **valet** in an aristocratic household.
- Imagine director Steve McQueen wants to make a film about Sancho’s life. Ask students to create a story board of Sancho’s life, highlighting six significant events.
- Imagine the Museum of Richmond wants to create an exhibition about Sancho. What objects or documents should be in the exhibition to reflect his life and work?
- Students can analyse the painting of Sancho by Gainsborough. They should know it was painted in Bath, a fashionable leisure town at the time. Is there anything unusual about this depiction of a Black man in Georgian England? What does it tell us about his reputation and status?
- Have a look at this letter Sancho wrote in which he talks about his family life. What is the relationship like between Sancho, his **wife** and his **children**?

*“You cannot imagine what hold little Billy gets on me – he grows- **prattles**- every day learns something new- and by his good-will would be ever in the shop with me- the monkey! He clings round my legs- and if I **chide** him or look sour- he holds up his little mouth to kiss me; I know I am the fool- for parents’ weakness is child’s strength... **Dame** Sancho would be better if she cared less. –I am her **barometer**- if a sigh escapes me, it is answered by a tear in her eye; I **oft assume** a gaiety to **illumine her dear sensibility with a smile**- which twenty years ago almost bewitched me; - and mark! - after twenty years’ enjoyment- constitutes my highest pleasure!”*

Glossary: **prattles** – chatters, **chide** – tell him off, **Dame** – Mrs., **barometer** – a device that measures air pressure, **oft assume** – often pretend, **illumine her dear sensibility with a smile** – bring a smile to her face

- Sancho often wrote about abolition and the plight of enslaved Black people around the world. In this letter he is writing to Laurence Stern, the author of the popular book *Tristram Shandy* and who used his platform to speak out against slavery.

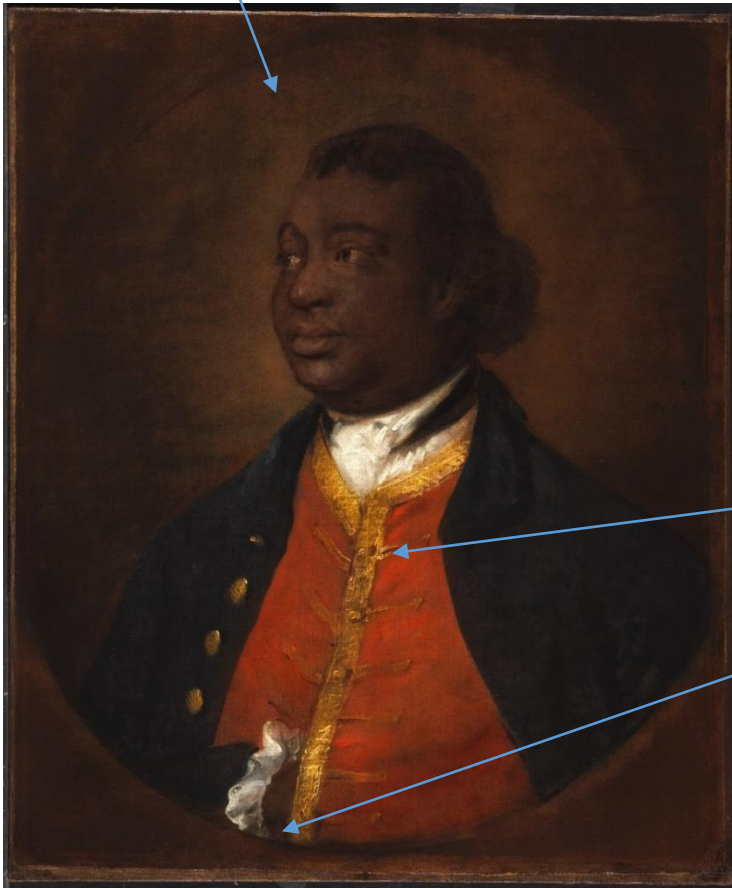
Why is Sancho praising Stern? What does he think about slavery? Why would Sancho be interested in abolition and the plight of enslaved people if he is now free and living a comfortable life?

*“Consider slavery- what it is- how **bitter a draught**- and how many millions are made to drink it. – Of all my favourite authors not one has drawn a tear in favour of my miserable black **brethren**- exempting yourself, and [another author]. That subject handled in your **striking manner** would ease the **yoke** (perhaps) of many...”*

Glossary: **bitter a draught** – harsh a taste, **brethren** – brothers, **striking manner** – dramatic way, **yoke** – subservience/oppression (a yoke is a long piece of wood attached to the neck of oxen to force them to work. This became a symbol for slavery)

The browns and reds in the painting give a sense of the kind and warm character of the sitter

Ignatius Sancho, 1768 – Thomas Gainsborough, (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.)



The portrait was painted in Bath. The wealthy would flock to the city along with their households. At the same time as he did Sancho's portraits, Gainsborough also painted the Duke and Duchess of Montagu.

Sancho is not wearing servant's livery. Instead he wears a gold trimmed waistcoat

Gentlemanly posture with his hand tucked into his waistcoat. Gives a sense of poise and dignity.

The painting only took 1hr and 40mins to complete. A very short amount of time for an oil painting. Does this impact how you see the painting? Or is the fact that it exists at all significant enough?

It is likely that the Duke paid for the portrait as a gift for Sancho. What does this show about the relationship between the Montagu's and Sancho?

On the next two pages are extracts about Ignatius Sancho from the Museum of Richmond's 1997 exhibition booklet 'Trading in Human Lives' by Valerie Boyes. ©Museum of Richmond

4. IGNATIUS SANCHO (1729–1780) An African Man-of-Letters

Amongst the black people who came to Britain between 1650 and 1800, just a few made their mark in society. One was Ignatius Sancho, who lived in Richmond in 1749–51 and 1766–74.

Ignatius Sancho was born in about 1729 on a slave ship carrying slaves from Africa to the West Indies, and his mother and father died soon after his birth.

He was brought to England at the age of two and given to three austere maiden sisters who lived in Greenwich. They gave him a second name, Sancho because they thought he looked like Sancho Panza, the servant in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Though the young man was keen to learn, the sisters resisted allowing him an education, since they wished to keep him domesticated.



Portrait of Ignatius Sancho
by Thomas Gainsborough, 1768
(National Gallery of Canada,
Ottawa)

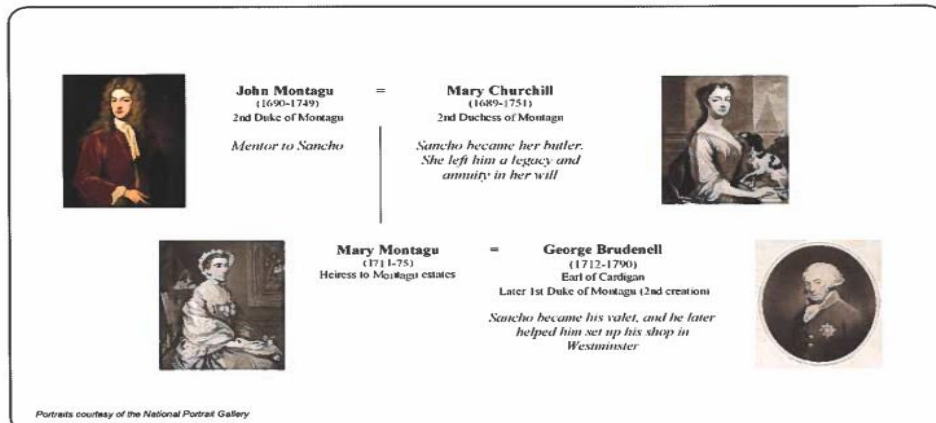
He was fortunate to meet John, Second Duke of Montagu, who lived near the sisters at Blackheath. The Duke owned Caribbean estates and had taken an interest in the education of black people and he gave the boy access to books and encouraged him in his studies. Through the patronage of members of the Montagu family and his own intellectual drive, Ignatius Sancho

rose from being a slave/servant, to valued personal retainer, to independent tradesman and a respected man of letters.

After the Duke's death in 1749, Sancho fled from the sisters to the Duke's widow, Mary Churchill, Duchess of Montagu. She made him her butler, a very important post in a noble household, and when she died in 1751 she left him a legacy of £70 and an annuity of £30 per year.

Sancho savoured the delights of London society, where he met many of the people who were to become his literary and artistic friends, like the author Lawrence Sterne and the actor David Garrick, who also had connections with Richmond. However, by 1766 he was in debt. So he returned to the Montagu household and worked as valet to the Second Duke's son-in-law George Brudenell, Earl of Cardigan. The Montagu title had died out with the death of John, the second Duke. George Brudenell was later made first Duke of Montagu of the new creation.

MEMBERS OF THE MONTAGU FAMILY ASSOCIATED WITH IGNATIUS SANCHO



Portraits courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery

The relationship between Sancho and the Montagu family seems to have been one of mutual obligation.¹³ The Duke paid for Sancho's portrait to be painted by Gainsborough whilst they were in Bath, though it is possible that Sancho knew Gainsborough before the sitting, through the Garricks and the Montagus.¹⁴ Here there may be another Richmond connection: Gainsborough lived for a short time on Richmond Hill and is buried in the churchyard of St Anne's, Kew.

When Sancho's health deteriorated and he had to leave the Duke's service, the Duke helped to set him up in a grocery shop in Westminster where many of his patrons came from London's aristocratic and intellectual society.

THE RICHMOND CONNECTION

The Montagu family owned a house in Richmond which stood by the river in what is now Buccleuch Gardens.

Letters written by Sancho were published after his death and some of them are headed 'Richmond', like the following addressed to 'MRS F' (possibly the wife of Mr Fisher, a musician):

Richmond, Oct 20, 1769

I sent you a note in Mrs. Sancho's name this day fortnight importing that she would hope for the pleasure of seeing you at Richmond before the fine weather takes its leave of us.... Come and scamper in the meadows with three ragged wild girls [a joking reference to his daughters] - Tell your coachman to drive under the hill to Mr. B's on the Common, where you will be gladly received by the best half of your much and greatly obliged friend.

IGNATIUS SANCHO¹⁵

As an older man, who had himself experienced moments of profligacy, Sancho gave advice to his neighbour the wayward Julius Soubise.

To Mr Soubise

Richmond, Oct. 11, 1772

Young man, thou canst not discern wood from trees.... Happy lad what a fortune is thine! - Look around you upon the fate of almost all of our unfortunate colour - see slavery - Providence has been very lavish of her bounty to you. - Vice is a coward: - to be truly brave, a man must be truly

¹³ Vincent Carretta (ed), *Letters of the late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (Penguin edition, 1998) p. xi

¹⁴ R. King, 'Ignatius Sancho and Portraits of the Black Elite' in R. King, S. Sandhu, J.

Walvin and J. Girdham, *Ignatius Sancho: an African Man of Letters* (1997) p. 29

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35

good ... You have the best wishes of your sincere friend (as long as you are your own friend).

IGNATIUS SANCHO¹⁶

Sancho had married Anne Osborne, a black woman originally from the West Indies, and they had seven children. Three of them died before they were six. The Richmond parish register records the death of one of Sancho's children and his presence as a witness at a marriage.

Burial 1769 March 28th John Sancho a child

Marriages 1758 July 13th Francis Williams of St Andrew's Holborn and

Anne Moore of Richmond; bears

Witnesses Ignatius Sancho, Andrew Moore

Sancho wrote minuets, songs and dances, some with titles associated with Richmond: like 'Kew Gardens', 'La Loge de Richmond' and 'Bushy Park'.



The First Cu., Foot it and Call off two Cus. & Foot it and call up again & Call off two Cus. Lead up to the top and Call off & Foot it hands round all six.

A dance, 'Kew Gardens', published in *Minuets, Cotillions and Country Dances for the Violin, Mandolin, German Flute & Harpsichord, composed by an African* [Ignatius Sancho], c.1767

THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF IGNATIUS SANCHO

Sancho first came to public attention in 1775 when, after the death in 1768 of Laurence Sterne, the author of *Tristram Shandy*, a letter which he wrote to Sterne in 1766, was published.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-7

His letters were published posthumously in 1782 and attracted an amazing 1,181 subscribers. They included people who lived in the Richmond area like his patron George Brudenell, first Duke of Montagu, the Duke of Queensbury, Horace Walpole and Mr Kisbee who had worked with him at the Montagus.

His letters and other writings show him to be a cultured man of wide interests — theatre, literature, art and music. Sancho's letters are articulate and amusing. He writes about his personal life, but also deals with current and important events. He shows a great understanding of the Britain which he inhabited.

He was also conscious of his unique role as a black person in British society and in his letters criticised the enslavement of his fellow Africans. In the letter to Laurence Sterne, Sancho asks him to deal with the subject of slavery in one of his novels:

July 21 1766

Reverend Sir -

Consider slavery - what it is - how bitter a draught - and how many millions are made to drink it. - Of all my favourite authors not one has drawn a tear in favour of my miserable black brethren - excepting yourself, and [another author]. That subject handled in your striking manner, would ease the yoke (perhaps) of many....

... Your most humble and Obedient Servant

IGNATIUS SANCHO¹⁷

He was the first known black person to vote in a Parliamentary election since, as a Westminster householder, he voted in the parliamentary elections of 1774 and 1780. He was also the first African to be given an obituary in the British Press.