Not as Sweet as You Think

As London Museum relocates in 2026, we are establishing a Research Centre as a trusted hub for London-focused research. The Centre will produce collaborative, equitable research rooted in our collections and will engage experts with diverse lived experiences.

As part of this process, the museum is testing new ways of producing research that is relevant to Londoners. This is being done in collaboration with people with lived experience, artists, academics, and community partners.

Our first approach led to participatory research in 2024 looking at Compassion on public transport in London. In September 2025, we used the same methodology to explore Sugar through a series of object-led workshops with Caribbean community partners.

Insights from our community partners inspired 'Not as Sweet as You Think', our new London, Sugar & Slavery gallery intervention created in collaboration with two sugar experts. The intervention includes additional object captions, and these essays which expand on the impact of sugar on health and the global economy.

Earthenware sugarloaf mould, about 1670

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The Sugar Economy

300 years ago European capitalists thoroughly reshaped the Caribbean region into a production site of large volumes of sugar, indigo and coffee. Driven by a rapidly growing demand for these products by consumers in Europe and North America, the Caribbean islands soon became the most globalised places on earth. The plantation workforce was brutally abducted from Africa and all necessities to keep the plantations going had to be imported.

The imported items that are mentioned in the bill of the Retreat Estate in Grenada came from all over Europe and North America. The iron for the machetes came from the furnaces and forgeries of Birmingham and the nearby industrial centres of the Black Country, UK. Many tons of British iron arrived in the West Indies varying from iron nails, the iron plaiting of the rollers that crushed the cane, and other tools such as hammers and saws. Two thirds of all the iron processed in Britain's booming iron industry in the 1700s also came from Sweden and Russia (1).

Since most islands had their forests cut and burned very quickly to produce sugar, tons of coal had to be imported from Britain to fuel the furnaces boiling the sugar juice, and to feed the plantation forges (2). Loggers in British North America provided the necessary timber (3). Flour, dried fish, pickled fish and corn came in great quantities from these colonies as well (4). Much of the coarse linen cloth worn by the enslaved plantation workers was woven in Hanover or in Osnabrück (Germany), whereas Welsh weavers produced the woollen and cotton cloth (5).

In the opposite direction, many tons of semi-refined sugar, molasses and rum were shipped over the Atlantic Ocean. For every ton of sugar, thousands of litres of molasses were collected as a valuable by-product. Molasses could be distilled as rum at the plantations or at factories overseas. By the 1770s, the British colonies of North America imported almost 6.5 million litres of molasses, most of which went to the 140 rum distilleries there (6). What was not used for liquors was sold as treacle to poor consumers in Britain and the British colonies of North America.

When the sugar came out of the sugar moulds, it was known as a muscovado. It was dry and clean enough to survive transport to the refineries in Europe without too much loss through rotting. By the 1750s, in Britain alone, 1,800 workers operated 120 sugar refineries. The refined sugar was sold at twice the price of the imported muscovado at that time, leaving a generous profit for the refineries (7). European governments jealously guarded the interests of their domestic refiners and never allowed planters in the Caribbean region to start their own sugar refining.

In the 1600s and 1700s, European states did all within their power to protect their own economies at the expense of their neighbouring countries and rivals. They did so by reducing their imports through high tariffs and maximising their exports. When the West Indies sugar economy took off in the 1680s, an increasing number of copper coins were minted and sent to the Caribbean and Americas to pay workers and suppliers of the burgeoning sugar plantations. Minting more copper coins would only benefit the Swedish copper mines. England started to produce tin coins bearing the image of King James II, bringing together the interests of planters, the exchequer and struggling Cornish Tin miners (8).

Sugar production in the West Indies increased from less than 7,000 tons in 1655, to 26,304 tons in 1700 and 74,090 tons in 1780 (9). Almost all of it was consumed in Britain and Ireland. By that time, the sugar market accounted for 3 percent of England's national income (10). The sugar economy included an extensive production chain employing many workers: from the building of the ships to transport enslaved people to the refining of the sugar. In addition, there was the service sector: the merchant houses, the shippers, the customs officers at the ports, the dockworkers and the shop keepers.

Britain's enslavement-based Atlantic commerce, in which sugar was a key asset, was crucial for its emergence as a global power in the 1700s. A third of all British exports went to African and American colonies and half of its imports came from its Atlantic commerce. The West Indies were by far the most important and valuable British colonial settlements in the Atlantic economy. With 800,000 enslaved and plantation workers it was a market that, by the end of the 1700s, amounted to a tenth of the British market in terms of population. The plantations were a big market for British wrought iron, copper and brass ware, cotton and linen (11). Crucially, demand was biggest for industrial wares, shipping, insurance and banking. This linked it to the most advanced sectors of the British economy. Subsequently, a growing and dynamic British economy led to rising wages in Britain and thus higher sugar consumption.

The West Indies economy also offered attractive investment opportunities. Returns on investments in the West Indies were four to seven times higher than at home in Britain (12). This encouraged many to try their luck in plantation agriculture, despite all the risks of wars with rival European colonial powers and rebellions. Many plantation owners contracted serious debts as they experienced failed harvests, destruction of property and rebellions by enslaved workers and indigenous populations. Many lost their properties, and plantations regularly changed hands, as happened with the Career Plantation in St. Vincent. Some creditors in England rapidly accumulated plantations from these debtors. The Lascelles, for example, acquired 24 plantations between 1773 and 1788, all from debtors who had fallen on hard times (13). They entered the ranks of England's high aristocracy and resided in their magnificent Harewood castle.

Plantation token (also known as a 'Part Real') about 1688

Plantations also had gardens where enslaved people could grow their own food, but the time given to work on these was limited to the evenings and Sundays. During the cane harvest there was no time at all to grow food. Plantations were dependent on imported food supplies, which made them particularly vulnerable in times of war. For example, the American War of Independence (1776-1783) led to a drying up of food shipments from North America, costing the lives of thousands of enslaved people in the West Indies (14). It was not the only war. The 1600s and 1700s were a time of ongoing violence and uprising in the Caribbean. Enslaved people resisted the plantation regimes and the frequent European wars invariably spilled over into the Caribbean region. Meanwhile, hurricanes regularly wreaked havoc on the plantation islands and their populations.

In addition to the human suffering and its enduring intergenerational traumas, the region's present skewed economy is a legacy of more than two centuries of enslavement, and almost four centuries of plantation production. Economically, the sugar islands of the West Indies were the most specialised economies to ever exist. This resulted in waning economic opportunities across many Caribbean islands. Since the decline of the plantation sector, the lack of economic diversification and opportunity has continued, pushing a large number of people to migrate.

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Machete, about 1850

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Sugar Harms Continue

Our preference for sweetness is deeply ingrained (1). It all starts with babies. Babies instinctively accept slightly sweet breast milk while showing a natural aversion to bitterness, something they must learn to tolerate (2). In nature, sweetness often signals energy-rich foods such as fruit, which provide not only a source of energy but also essential vitamins and minerals (1).

In contrast, widely available sugar-sweetened foods and drinks provide minimal nutritional value, beyond being a source of short-lived energy and pleasure. When consumed in excess, they become a source of suffering, contributing to significant damage to human health (3,4). Ironically, sugar first entered European diets not as a staple sweetener but as a medicinal aid used to mask the bitterness of medications. This was long before its mass production was enabled by the Transatlantic Trade in enslaved African people (5).

The cut of the machete marked the beginning of processing a wild grass into refined sugar crystals. Humans have long sought ingenious methods to extract, refine, and preserve crops, and early sugar-processing techniques made it possible to concentrate sweetness from sugarcane (2, 6). This processing widened access to sweetness, and Britain became 'addicted' to sugar (7). Although it is debated whether sugar is addictive in the same way as substances such as tobacco, alcohol, or drugs, it is widely acknowledged that sugar has addictive properties that can drive habitual consumption (7).

Sugar became an indispensable ingredient added to dishes and drinks of every meal, particularly in Britain (2). This was so much the case that the annual sugar consumption per person increased from five pounds in 1700 to eighteen pounds in 1800 (8). Through their power, status and influence, royalty and wealthy elites also particularly facilitated sugar's demand for centuries (2).

The demand for sugar inflicted immense human suffering through the Transatlantic Trade in enslaved African People. Food rations of enslaved people on plantations often included sugar, molasses and even rum (2), provisions that offered little nutritional value and were ultimately detrimental to their health. However, some received no food and were instead paid in rum to buy it themselves, or given little time to grow their own. As a result, many went hungry (2). Planters also sometimes encouraged rum consumption amongst Indian indentured labourers, who were brought to the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations after abolition and the end of enslaved African labour (9).

The whole of Britain benefitted from the Transatlantic Trade in enslaved African people during the 1700s and early 1800s (11), as the supply of desirable sugar, treacle and rum increased drastically (11). One health impact in Britain was that higher sugar consumption contributed to tooth decay amongst the elite and then the general population (25).

The pursuit of sweetness reshaped landscapes as well as diets. Vast land was devoted to sugar plantations. Entire islands, such as Barbados, shifted from diverse agriculture, where people grew their own food, to being almost completely sugarcane plantations (14, 15).

Today, sugar continues to shape land use and health outcomes. In the UK, despite government advice to reduce sugar consumption, vast areas of agricultural land are dedicated only to sugar beet (a different crop from sugarcane) production, particularly in East Anglia and the East Midlands (12). This is even though the national sugar supply exceeds the population's recommended maximum intake by two and a half times (13). Around 115,000 acres of prime farmland are used to grow sugar beet, which is processed and refined by a single company, British Sugar (12).

Harvesting sugar beet also contributes to substantial soil loss, around 489,000 tonnes each year which is sold on (12). This depletes natural resources from farmland that could otherwise support the cultivation of more nutritionally beneficial crops for the whole population. If sugar beet is reduced to the recommended maximum intake for the UK population, around 40,000 hectares of land could be freed. This is enough to grow about an additional 148,000 tonnes of peas, 1.8 million tonnes of potatoes, or 3.1 million tonnes of carrots (12).

Sugar remains a double-edged sword. Despite the shameful history of its mass production and its long-standing impact on human health, its appeal has not diminished. In the UK, young children consume roughly twice the recommended maximum amount of sugar (14).

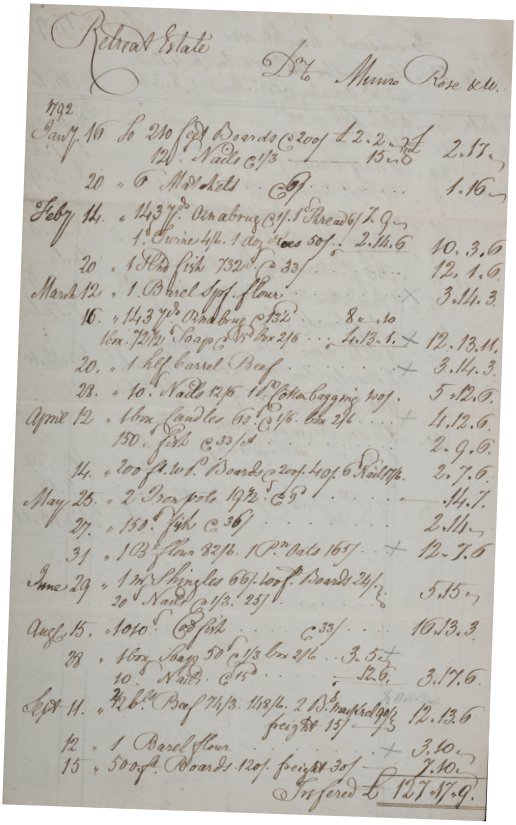
In Tower Hamlets where London Museum Docklands is situated, 30% of 5-year-old children had tooth decay in 2022 (16). In the period 2023-24, 41.7% of 10–to-11-year-old children were overweight or living with obesity (15). Both are linked to high sugar intake.

This suffering from sugar and sugary foods and drinks continues round the globe. The prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity in 10 Caribbean territories in 2018 ranged from 43.0-60.1%. This is thought to be due to large imports of processed foods and sugar-sweetened drinks (17). The global increase in access and use of sugar is associated with higher incidences of tooth decay (18). Tooth decay affects 2.5 billion people worldwide, with sugar in food and drink being the most common cause (4).

Worldwide in 2022, over 390 million 5-19-year-olds were overweight and 160 million of the same age group were living with obesity (3). Being overweight during childhood and adolescence has serious consequences for health. It increases the risk of developing non-communicable diseases, such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and is associated with these conditions occurring at an earlier age in life (3).

The influence once exerted by royalty and wealthy elites has not disappeared; it has evolved. Today, multinational corporations shape dietary patterns by having immense influence over food production, marketing, affordability, and availability. They also lobby intensely against government restrictions that may reduce population intake of unhealthy products (19, 20). The world's biggest food multinational corporations depend on sales of unhealthy products (21). In the UK, more than two thirds of food and drink sales from 7 of the top 10 global food manufacturers come from unhealthy products, high in fat, salt and sugar (22).

Highly processed, low nutritional value foods and drinks, are often the most accessible and affordable options for many communities. Less healthy foods are a three times cheaper source of calories compared with healthy foods and the price difference is increasing (23). This is leading to an inescapable situation from the grip of unhealthy food and drink, particularly those high in sugar.



A bill for the Retreat estate, Grenada, 1792-94

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