

# Universities investigating link between steam, rail, colonialism and slavery

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A group of universities is examining links between the steam-powered rail of the past and its links to colonialism and the slave trade.

The White Rose university consortium said its project will look at the “economic, social and infrastructural legacy of steam and slavery across the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”

It said that, before now, there was little interdisciplinary study looking at the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, when slavery fed into emerging systems of steam and railway infrastructure.

“The relationship between steam power and global trade is complex, from the adoption of steam power on plantations to the global distribution of materials and products, and the adoption of new business models to finance capital projects. Furthermore, the wealth generated in the colonial economy was a stimulus to industrialisation, long after the abolition of slavery in the UK and US,” it said.

“The project will create a sustainable research network on the relationship between steam power and colonialism over the long nineteenth century (1750-1914). It will develop a greater understanding of how

the advent of steam-power and railways was embedded in both colonial and the metropolitan infrastructures of commerce and transport. It will establish a new agenda for the communities impacted by the advent of steam and the global economy – from the plantation to the factory floor.”

The study will be led by Professor Jonathan Finch at the University of York, assisted by academics at York, Leeds and Sheffield.

They said they hoped to build academic connections in this area and engage with museums to develop new pathways to “wide public impact” – helping deliver public-facing activities and engaging new and diverse audiences, particularly from BAME backgrounds.