HOW DID SLAVERY HELP BUILD BRITAIN'S INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION?



WHAT'S HAPPENING?

New research has found that powerful British businessmen made money from enslaved workers in Cuba even after Britain had abolished slavery in most of its empire. The workers mined copper at El Cobre, near Santiago de Cuba. Copper was an important material for Britain's Industrial Revolution because it was used in machines, railways, telegraph wires and factories. Two men linked to the Bank of England, Charles Pascoe Grenfell and William Thompson, helped run companies connected with the mine. The workers lived in prison-like conditions and faced violence, torture and attempts to stop them escaping. Britain ended its slave trade in 1807 and abolished slavery in most of its empire in 1833, but slavery continued in other countries. The research shows that British money and businesses could still benefit from slavery abroad. Enslavement at El Cobre finally ended in 1868 after Cuban revolutionaries captured the town.

WHY IS THIS INTERESTING?

This story shows that ending slavery by law did not immediately end the profits made from forced labour. It also connects slavery to factories, railways and modern technology. Many people imagine slavery as separate from industrial progress, but copper mined by enslaved people helped supply the growing industries of Britain. It raises difficult questions about responsibility, money and hidden connections in history.

THINK LIKE A HISTORIAN

"Why did slavery continue to make money for British businesses after abolition?"

Source: The Guardian

https://www.theguardian.com/news/2026/nov/22/bank-of-england-directors-illegally-profited-enslavement-cuba