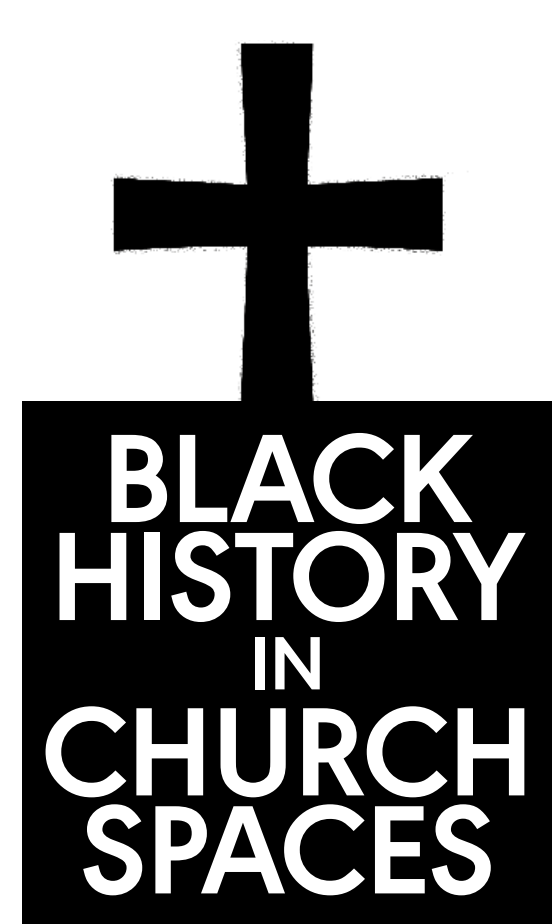




Black Abolitionists

Faith and the fight against Slavery



Above: title page of Olaudah Equiano's biography
Source: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Olaudah Equiano (otherwise known as Gustavus Vassa) was one of a group of African people in Britain who had experienced slavery first hand. Their testimony and activism were critical in turning British public opinion against the slave trade. Without them Britain would probably not have been one of the first European nations to abolish its trade in captives in 1807.

Equiano was born around 1745 among the Igbo people in what is now Nigeria. In 1757, aged 11 or 12, he was playing in his family compound when two men and a woman climbed over the walls and, 'in a moment', seized him and his sister. The slavers separated the siblings on their forced march to the coast and sold them to British slave traders.

In the British colony of Virginia Equiano experienced the brutality of plantation enslavement, but also taught himself to read and write. After a British naval officer "purchased" him, he travelled to many different countries. In 1766, Equiano was able to purchase his freedom, having saved money paid to him for various chores and errands. As a Black man unaccompanied by an "owner", he still had to be wary of kidnap and enslavement during his travels.

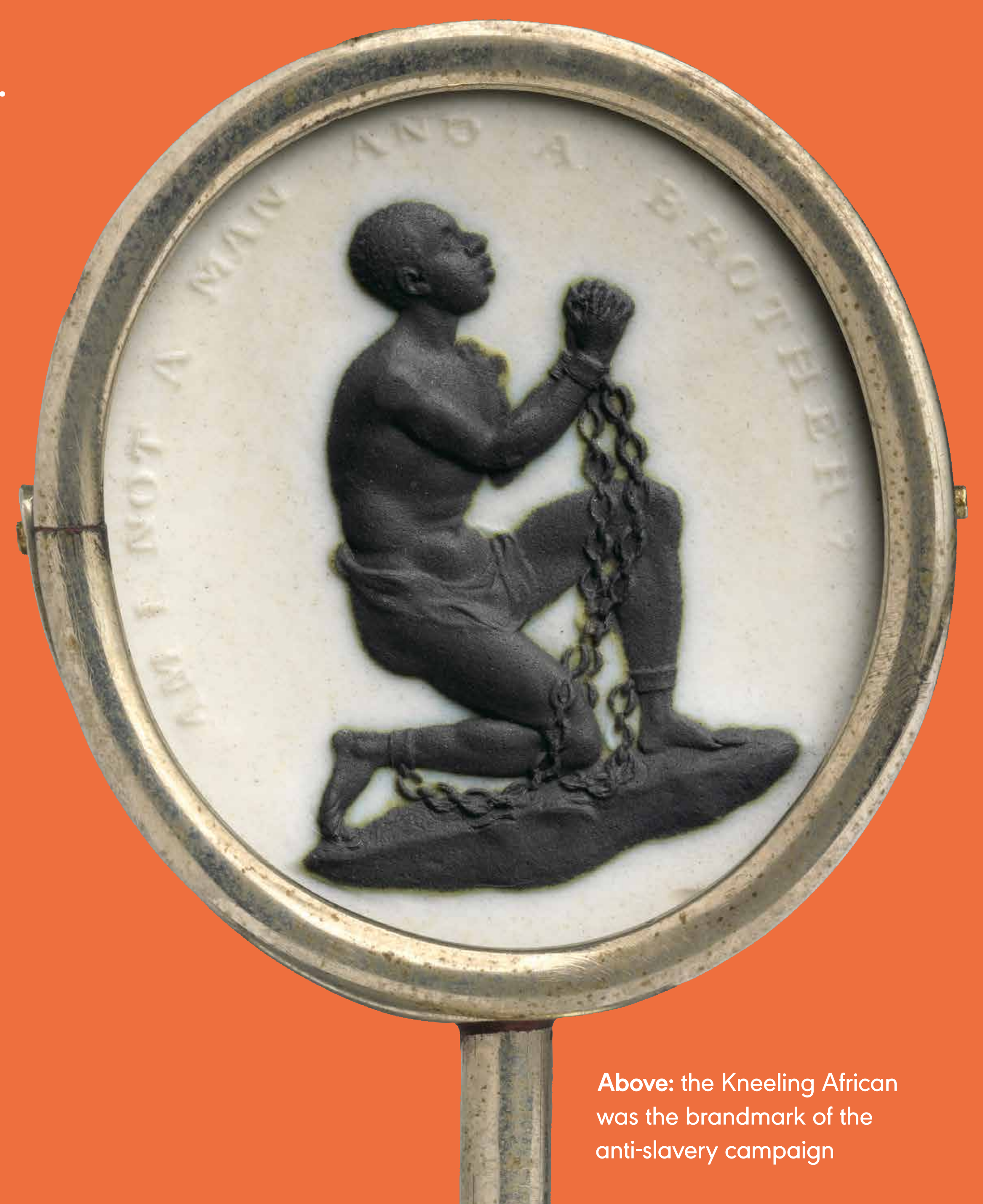
Equiano was baptised into the Church of England at St Margarets Church, Westminster, in 1759 and became deeply involved in campaigning against the slave trade not just as a witness but as a Christian. He pointed to the hypocrisy of slave traders and slave owners who also professed to be Christians. In 1789 he published his life story, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. The book was a major contributor to the shift in British public attitudes to the slave trade.

Equiano toured the country, visiting Birmingham, Belfast, Hull, Sheffield and Aberdeen and using Methodist chapels and Quaker meeting houses, lecture halls and public meeting spaces to give first hand testimony of slavery. He helped to convert whole congregations to the antislavery cause. Joseph and Elizabeth Read, for example, became leading anti-slavery campaigners after hearing him speak in Sheffield in August 1790. Their daughter, Mary Anne Rawson attended the inaugural World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 and went on to form the Sheffield Ladies Association for the Universal Abolition of Slavery.

Equiano had deep connections with the Church of England as well as with nonconformists. He probably met his wife Susannah Cullen while speaking in Cambridge and they were married in Soham Parish Church in Cambridgeshire in 1792. Equiano was buried in part of the Whitfield chapel cemetery in London, a site that is now a garden. A plaque was unveiled nearby in what is now the American International Church near Tottenham Court Road.

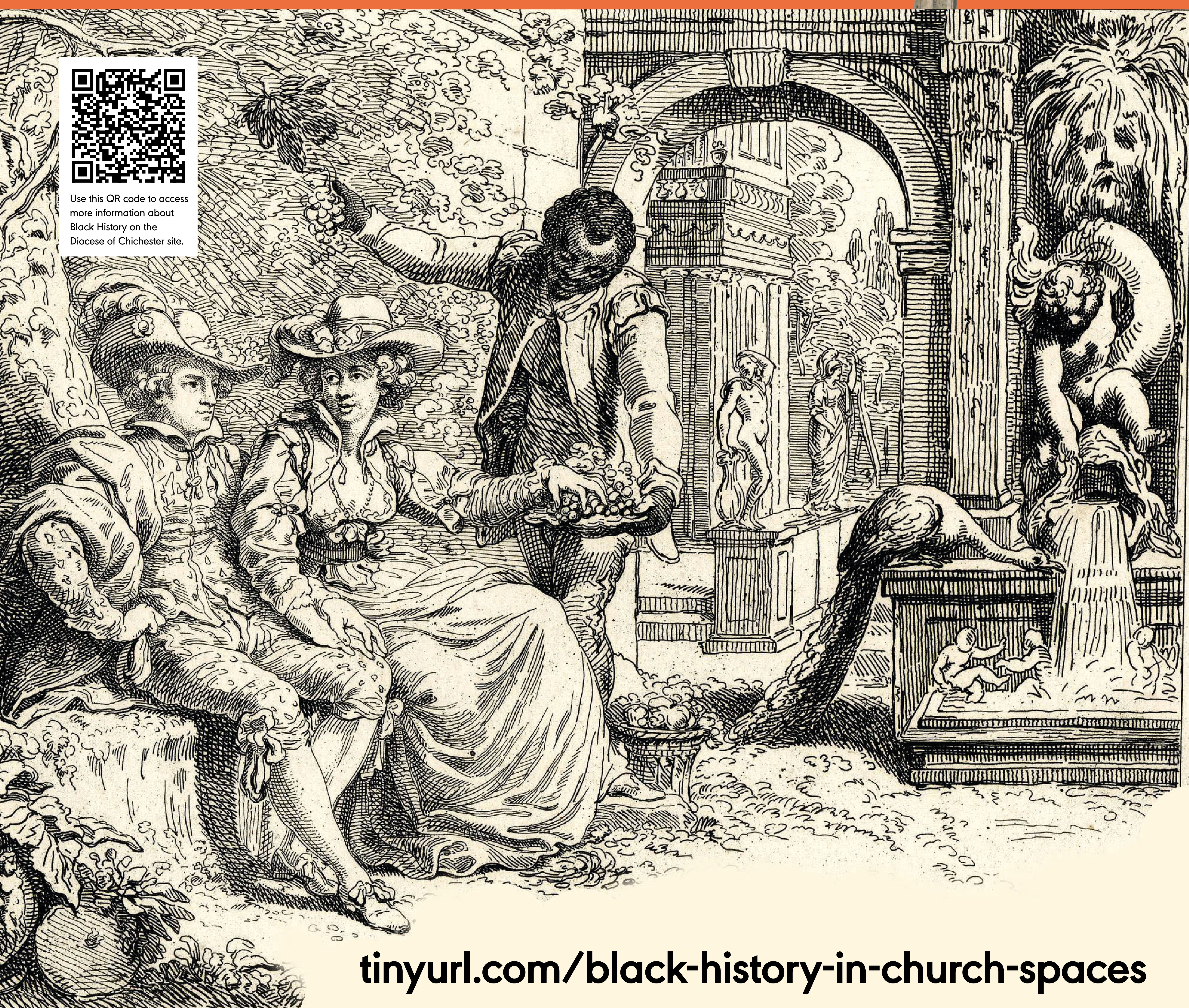


Above: Phillis Wheatley Former enslaved writer and anti-slavery campaigner
Source: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution



Above: the Kneeling African was the landmark of the anti-slavery campaign

Below: Ottobah Cugiano – print by Cosway, 1784
Source: The Trustees of the British Museum



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