

## Slave owner and abolitionist come face to face

Review by **Maev Kennedy**  
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*The two sides of London's slave trade ... slave merchant George Hibbert (left) and a contemporary portrait of abolitionist Robert Wedderburn, by artist Paul Howard. Photograph: Docklands Museum in London*

Robert Wedderburn, born in Jamaica to an enslaved mother and a plantation owning father, has been recreated by the artist Paul Howard every inch as imposing and commanding as the towering portrait of the millionaire slave owner George Hibbert. The twin portraits, each the size of a garage door, will go on display together for the first time in a new permanent gallery at the Docklands museum in London. Housed in one of the warehouses that were at the heart of the capital's hidden role in the slave trade, the new gallery will open on November 10.

Hibbert, one of the wealthiest slave owners in London - and leader of the campaign against abolishing the trade - was chairman of the West India Dock Company which shipped out trade goods to buy slaves in Africa and imported sugar and molasses from the Caribbean. The Georgian society artist Sir Thomas Lawrence portrayed him upholstered in luxury, dressed in sumptuous cherry velvet, hand resting on the charts mapping his fortune, with the slave ship *Amistad* moored by the warehouses of his palatial new docks, in the background.

Robert Wedderburn has been recreated in a huge collage photographic image by the contemporary artist Paul Howard. The model is the actor Lloyd Gordon, who bears a striking resemblance to the radical preacher and campaigner against the slave trade. He is shabby but magnificent, a machete at his waist, an axe at his feet symbolising his abolitionist essay *The Axe Laid to the Root*, and a copy of the 1831 weekly journal *The Poor Man's Guardian* - and a

contemporary Guardian newspaper - by his hand. In the background the Canary Wharf tower dominates the present dockland palaces of commerce and leisure.

The museum already owned the magnificent portrait of Hibbert, but agonised over displaying it in the new gallery when there was no comparable portrait from the abolitionist side: the commission was the result.

There are contemporary images but no formal portrait of Wedderburn, whose father was the plantation owner James Wedderburn, who sold his slave Rosanna knowing she was pregnant with his child, requesting the child should be free from birth. Although nominally free, all his life Wedderburn remembered watching his mother and grandmother being whipped as punishment for minor offences. He became a sailor, and then a radical preacher calling for armed revolution in both Jamaica and England. He spent several years in Dorchester prison, where he was visited by leading radicals including members of the abolition movement.

"He just seems to vanish from the records in the end, we have been unable to find out what finally happened to him," curator Tom Wareham said, "but we have a very soft spot for Robert here, he was a great character."

*The portraits will be on permanent display in London, Sugar and Slavery, Museum in Docklands, from November 10 2007.*