

OCTOBER 2023

THE ST HELENA AMBASSADOR



Editorial

Hi, welcome to the St Helena Ambassador!

In this edition you can read about St Helena's Fibre Optic Cable Project and view a timeline with key milestones of the Project; and read about an ancient DNA analyses which shed light on origins of St Helena's liberated Africans.

If you'd like to contribute a story to the St Helena Ambassador, please feel free to contact me on tel: 22470 or via email: jodie.s-constantine@sainthelena.gov.sh.

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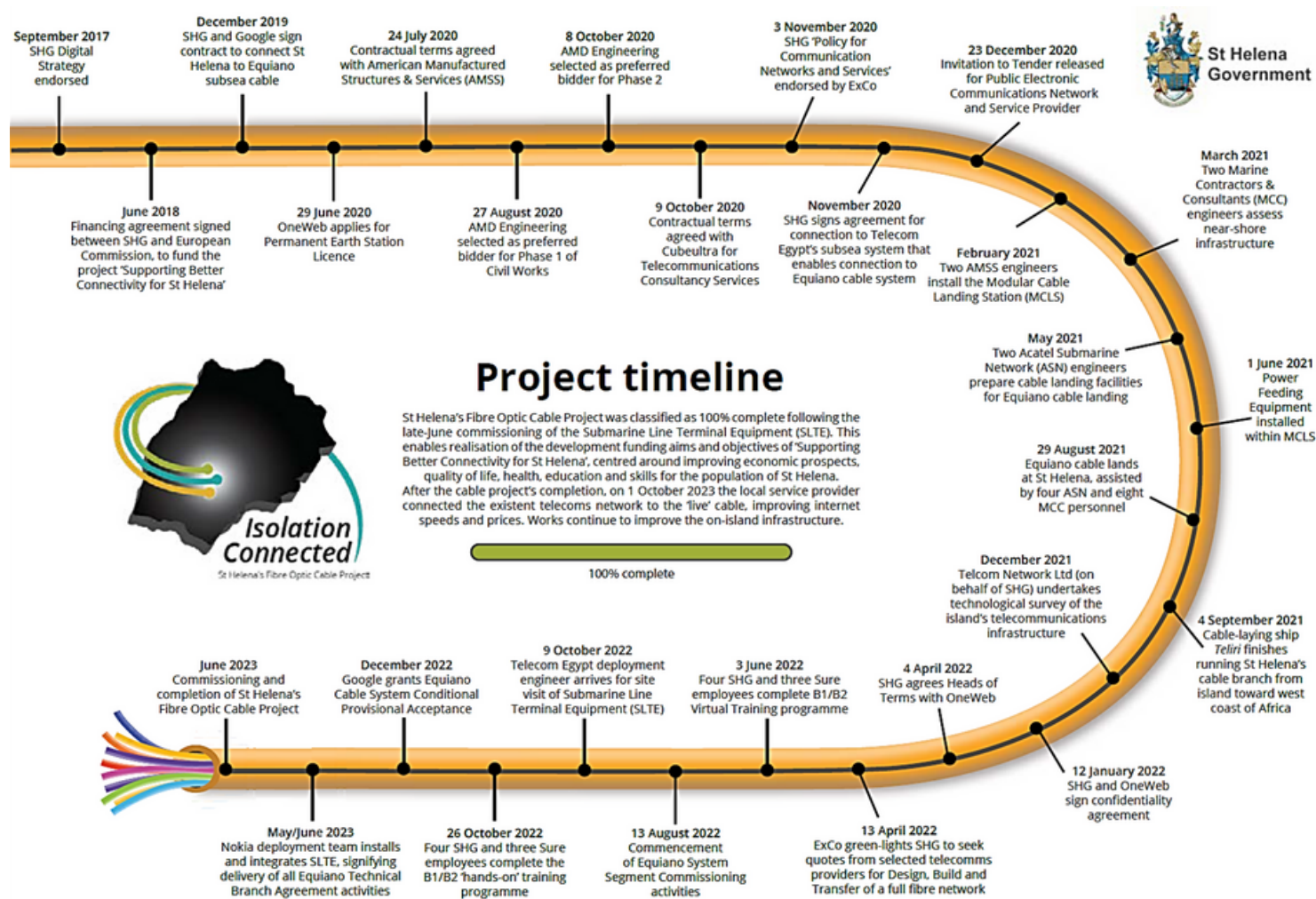
**ST HELENA'S FIBRE OPTIC
CABLE PROJECT
100% COMPLETE**

**ANCIENT DNA ANALYSES
SHED LIGHT ON ORIGINS
OF ST HELENA'S LIBERATED
AFRICANS**

St Helena's Fibre Optic Cable Project

100% complete

St Helena's Fibre Optic Cable Project is now 100% complete following the final commissioning works in June 2023. The six-year long project was funded by the 11th European Development Fund (EDF11) with an objective of 'Supporting Better Connectivity for St Helena'. This centred on improving economic prospects, quality of life, health, education and skills for the population of St Helena. The Fibre Optic Cable Project is one of the most significant projects for the Island in recent memory, and will bring positive benefits for generations to come. There have been a number of significant milestones along the project, from bidding and obtaining funding from the European Commission, to signing the agreement with Google to connect to the Equiano subsea cable, all the way through designing and building infrastructure to accommodate the cable to the eventual commissioning works which allowed the cable to 'go-live' in June. This project was led by St Helena Government's Equiano Project Manager, Jerry Roberts, and his team. It involved working with, and coordinating, a variety of international partners to deliver this unique project in one of the world's most remote settings. On 1 October 2023, the on-Island network was connected to the cable, meaning business and the public switched from using slow and expensive satellite-based internet to much faster cable-based internet. In upcoming editions of the Ambassador newsletter, we will focus on the key milestones in the Fibre Optic Cable Project.



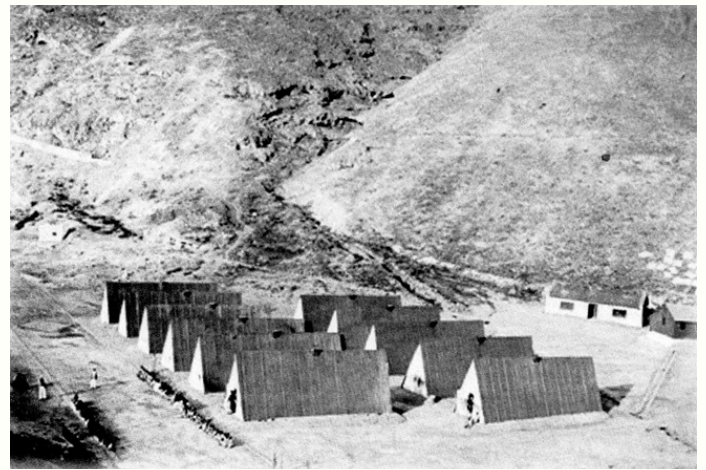
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Ancient DNA analyses shed light on origins of St Helena's liberated Africans

Between 1840 and 1872, more than 25,000 liberated Africans (more than 5 times the current population of the Island) were offloaded from captured slave ships at St Helena, as part of Britain's attempt to stop the now illegal transatlantic slave trade.

A small number settled on the Island; most were later transported onwards to British colonies in the Caribbean, whilst some were settled in Sierra Leone and Cape Town. Around a third of the liberated Africans died whilst on-Island, being ill and frail from their perilous voyages or from poor living conditions on the Island, resulting in more than 8000 men, women and children being buried along the hillsides of Rupert's Valley.

Today, the Rupert's Valley burial grounds are the only known place in the world to contain solely the remains of people taken straight



Rupert's Liberated African Depot in 1861. Source: Dr Andrew Pearson / Museum of Saint Helena

from slaver ships only days or weeks out of Africa – therefore it is considered [‘the most significant physical remaining trace of the transatlantic slave trade on Earth.’](#)

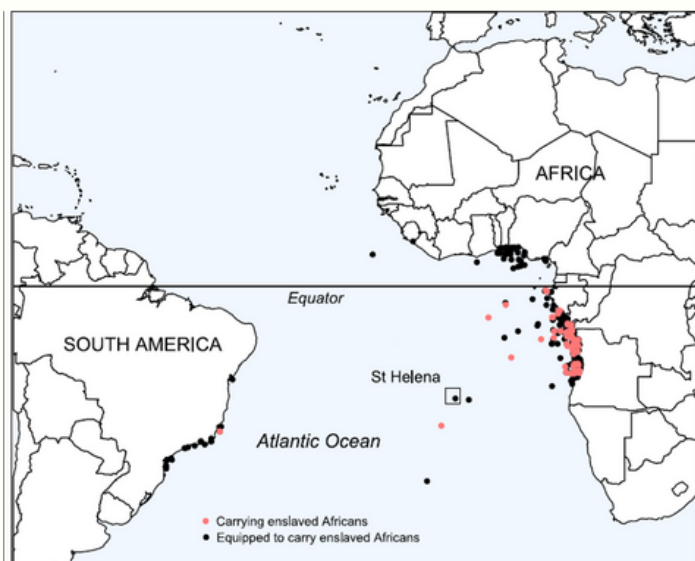
Historical records indicated the majority of those buried in Rupert's Valley likely originated from West Central Africa, but little else was known about their lives or origins, until 7 September 2023, when researchers [published the first direct evidence](#) for the origins of St Helena's liberated Africans.

The ancient DNA analysis was reported in The American Journal of Human Genetics, and shed light on the origins and identities of those buried within the valley.

The DNA analysis showed that the liberated Africans most likely originated from diverse communities within the general area of northern Angola, the Congo, and Gabon (West Central Africa).

This conclusion was reached by comparing the Liberated African DNA to the DNA of more 3,000 present-day individuals from 90 populations across sub-Saharan Africa.

Marcela Sandoval-Velasco from the University of Copenhagen commented: *“By sequencing their DNA and comparing it with that of thousands of living people from across sub-Saharan Africa we were able to infer where in*



Locations of slave ships captured by the Royal British Navy between 1840 and 1872 and brought to St Helena according to data from the vice-admiralty court at St Helena. Source: The American Journal of Human Genetics / Dr Andrew Pearson

Ancient DNA analyses shed light on origins of St Helena's liberated Africans

in Africa they likely originated and thereby help restore knowledge of their ancestral connections with Africa."

Chairperson of the Liberated African Advisory Committee (LAAC), Helena Bennett, commented: *"This project was part of a larger ongoing effort by many people on and off the Island to try and restore knowledge of St Helena's 'liberated' Africans. We hope that by telling their story we can honour their legacy and ensure that their lives and fates are not forgotten."*

Around 2011, [EUROTAST](#) approached SHG to include the liberated Africans on St Helena in their multi-disciplinary programme that covered various aspects of the transatlantic slave trade. They entered into an agreement with SHG to undertake the study, and during the course of the fieldwork, they fell under the supervision of the former Airport Directorate.

EUROTAST began their study by collecting DNA samples from the teeth of 63 of St Helena's Liberated Africans (selected from the 325 individuals who had already been purposefully exhumed by a team of archaeologists during 2008 airport development works). To minimize damage to the remains, only one tooth was sampled from each individual. The samples included 32 adult males, 16 adult females, and 15 adolescents whose gender could not be determined. Out of the 63 total samples, 20 were viable to study.

Sandoval-Velasco, Hannes Schroeder (who led the study) and other colleagues then analysed these 20 ancient DNA samples in a dedicated laboratory at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark.



Excavation of the 325+ remains at Rupert's Valley in 2008.
Source: Dr Andrew Pearson



Five Liberated Africans still living on St Helena in around 1900. Credit: Thomas Jackson / Museum of Saint Helena

More recently, when the results of the study began to be yielded, EUROTAST communicated with the St Helena Research Institute and the LAAC, and in 2020 hosted a webinar presenting their initial findings to the community, both local and international. The lead archaeologist of the 2008 excavations (Dr Andrew Pearson), and the LAAC Chairperson, were also involved in ensuring accuracy and context for the final research article.