Life for slaves on a sugar plantation

The Time Chronicles adventure *The Cauldron of Darkness* is set on a sugar plantation in the West Indies, in the 1790s. At that time, many enslaved Africans were forced to work for British masters on the sugar plantations – slavery meant that they had no choice over the work they did, no pay and no freedom to leave the plantation. They were often treated with extreme cruelty. Slavery was finally abolished in Britain and the British Empire in the 1830s.

Daily life

Slaves were forced to work for at least 12 hours per day – and it could be even longer at busy times, such as harvest. They had no holidays or time off – not even at weekends. They were treated more like animals than human beings.

All slaves over the age of six had to work. Only very young children and some elderly or disabled people were excused. Although families often lived together, there was nothing to stop the slaves’ master splitting up a family and selling a mother or father to another owner, leaving the children behind. Children born
in slavery remained slaves themselves and were considered the property of their parents’ master. Slaves were often branded with special plantation marks so that if they ran away, it would be possible to identify which plantation they came from. The same marks were used on animals and equipment. Slaves who tried to escape would be brought back to the plantation and whipped, or tortured in other ways, in order to ‘teach a lesson’ to others. Life on the plantations was so hard that many new slaves became ill when they arrived. Killer diseases like dysentery meant that many slaves on the plantations died. A poor diet didn’t help — food on the plantations was often very poor quality and very boring to eat. Some plantation owners forced their slaves to grow their own food as well as working on the plantation.

Work in the fields
The work was backbreaking and exhausting. Slaves had to clear and plough the land, and then dig individual holes in the hard soil for each sugar cane plant — a task which meant endless bending and stooping, in the hot sun.

At harvest time, the slaves had to cut the sugar cane down, strip off the leaves and tie the canes into bundles. They then loaded the bundles on to carts to be taken to the sugar mill.

Work in the sugar mill
In the sugar mills, the sugar canes were crushed and then boiled to extract the sugar. There was a horrible sweet smell, and it got very hot indeed inside the mills. Even very strong slaves found it impossible to work in the mills for more than a few hours at a time. It was dangerous work, too — hands and fingers could easily be trapped in the rollers that crushed the cane, and those whose job was to skim the dirt off the boiling cauldrons of sugar often got badly burnt.

Some more websites to explore
The following websites contain information, first-hand accounts and contemporary pictures of life for slaves:

- [http://abolition.e2bn.org/slavery_69.html](http://abolition.e2bn.org/slavery_69.html)