

The rickety sailing ship named the Zong left Ghana, heading across the Atlantic to Jamaica.

It was 1781 and the 107-tonner was designed to carry no more than 200 slaves. Instead, the skipper Luke Collingwood had squeezed 442 people on board.

What happens next is just one of the horrifying stories Gospel Oak-based writer and singer Matthew Crampton has compiled in his latest book, *Human Cargo*.

"Here is the Zong, a small boat, under-crewed, over-laden, with no proper captain. What could go wrong?" he asks.

As Matthew reports, the boat's navigation was so poor they missed Jamaica – and when they realised they were off course, with diminished supplies of fresh water, they solved the problem by throwing slaves overboard. It so transpired that it then rained heavily, filling up water butts and making the murders even more pointless.

Matthew wrote the acclaimed biography of

The London Lubbers at Harwich last year; circled below: Matthew Crampton



the Trebor sweet company and is an accomplished folk singer with the group the London Lubbers. Now he is considering the history of what he terms "human cargo" – the trade in people to provide muscle for new economies.

In doing so, he not only writes of the 18th and 19th centuries but provides testimony from today to show that the evil of people trafficking is still very much alive.

Using first-hand testimonies and recounting the stories through contemporaneous folk song, he creates a vivid picture of centuries of extreme cruelty and extraordinary crime that continues.

"Today, smartphones can take us right into migrant boats," he says. "We can perch among the bodies and hear the groans. But how do we put a face on the migrants

of the past? And if we could hear these travellers, how might their experience help us attend to those today in terrified transit?"

This is where his folk background comes in. The book is the result of a project for the annual Harwich Shanty Festival.

"The festival asked me to create a show on a maritime subject," he said. "I chose 'human cargo' because it links themes such as emigration, slavery, convict transportation and the press gang.

"But, as I started writing, these terrible

reports started arriving from the South-east Mediterranean. Suddenly the issue of migration became very real. This enabled me to introduce modern testimony. Where past tales surprise and old songs engage, today's stories help you shudder.

"They are horrible – and in their similarity to the past, for cruelty remains constant, they bring that past alive."

The book ranges from telling of straightforward kidnappings such as the vicious abductions in Africa to the forcible removal of Highland populations under the Gordon Clearances.

He discusses the use of press gangs to find Navy crews to the use of deportation for minor crimes that again provided a

cheap pool of manpower for the capitalists exploiting the newly conquered lands around the globe.

Matthew highlights the economic background to such extreme cruelty.

"As tiny England grabbed huge colonies, so it needed labour to exploit them," says Matthew.

"But private enterprise – which used kidnapping – soon could not keep up with the demand, so the government joined in," says Matthew.

At first it was political prisoners but soon spread to anyone convicted of a minor crime.

In the haunting folk song *All Around My Hat*, Matthew finds the words expressed at the time of deportation to Australia to illustrate the individual tragedies such a policy

created.

"My love was fair, and my love was handsome, And cruel was the judge that sentenced her away

For thieving was a thing she was never inclined to

They sent my love across the sea 10,000 miles away

All around my hat, I will wear the green willow All around my hat for 12 month and a day

And if anyone should ask me the reason why I'm wearing it

It's all for my true love who is far, far away..."

Matthew's book also considers how we can shift the perception of what the movement of a human being from one place to another really means.

"Every statistic shows that migration helps the economy," he says. "Yet most newspaper headlines damn migrants. I thought: is there another way to frame the discussion? Why not try to personalise the debate and give it context?"

"I wanted to give the migrants of the 18th and 19th centuries a voice. I found many – diaries and personal accounts of people actually on the

This time it's PERSONAL

Dan Carrier talks slavery, deportation, press gangs and emigration with Matthew Crampton, author of a new book, *Human Cargo*

emigrant boats or slave ships. When we hear these voices – and we set them beside those of people trafficked or transported today – we see remarkable similarities. Patterns of cruelty do not change."

● *Human Cargo*. By Matthew Crampton. Muddler Books, £9.99.

● The London Lubbers will be performing at the Heath Street Baptist Church in Hampstead on Friday, May 13 and Saturday 14. Tickets are £8 in advance through humancargo.co.uk



Slaves being jettisoned from the Zong

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