

Abolition

Background information



The anti-slavery campaign

Britain went from being the most active slave trading country at the turn of the nineteenth century to showing the most vehement opposition in only a few generations. Factors that pushed Britain to turn against slavery are many – economic, revolutionary, political, societal, and religious. The history of abolition by the British – first of the slave trade and then of slavery involved the campaigning efforts of key individuals and the mobilization of the masses.

Changing perspectives

Britain went from being the most active slave trading country at the turn of the nineteenth century to showing the most vehement opposition in only a few generations. Why did the British begin to change its attitude to the transatlantic slave trade at the point where it seemed to have been so economically viable? There are many factors, and their relative importance continues to be debated. Social, religious, political, economic and revolutionary forces were all clearly at work. There was social and ideological change in The Enlightenment period and enslavement sat uncomfortably alongside the free trade economy of the industrial revolution in Britain. Some have argued that the economic value of the plantations fell following the loss of the North American colonies in 1776. Although the attractiveness of cane sugar and other crops produced by plantation slaves declined in the face of the new industrial economy in Britain with technologically advanced production methods, there is evidence that the West Indies were operating profitably as late as the 1820s. Others point to the intervention of religion, and especially the role of the Quakers and the nonconformist churches as agents of change. The Society of Friends (who became the Quakers) put forward their objections to slavery as early as the late 1600s, produced the first anti-slavery literature in the 1760s, and presented their first petition to Parliament in 1763¹. They were ignored as eccentrics. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was a vociferous critic of the slave trade and published his ‘*Thoughts Upon Slavery*’ in 1774.

Insurrection, a series of rebellions and revolts throughout the Caribbean and the southern states of America, as well as political and social reform and an effective anti-slavery movement, finally ended first the slave trade and then the institution of slavery itself. The revolution in Haiti defeating thousands of French and British troops, made the continuation of the transatlantic slave trade seem untenable. It was clear that if slavery was not abolished, then slaves might well emancipate themselves.

The work of some former slaves contributed to the anti-slavery movement (most notably Ottobah Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince) as did the ongoing resistance and rebellions in the colonies. There were also British people who were prepared to come forward and testify to the inhumanity of slavery including John Newton, a sea captain who later became an Anglican priest and author of the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’.

Course of events

Several court cases, such as the infamous slave ship the *Zong* in 1781 brought the harsh reality of the trade to the attention of the wider public in Britain [[click to go to Middle Passage Background](#)]

¹ Although they treated them less harshly some Quakers were still slave owners. In America, Quakers who in time freed their slaves paid them compensation which was not the case in Britain.

Information]. There was also a growing legal problem relating to the position of enslaved Africans in Britain. Granville Sharp brought the controversial test case of James Somerset to court and in 1772 it was ruled that enslaved people in England, Wales & Ireland could not be forced to return to the Caribbean, which was wrongly interpreted to mean that all slaves in Britain were free.

Although there had been criticisms of, and protests against, slavery since its inception, the first mass anti-slavery society was formed in 1787 by 12 men including Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp: The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The group quickly recruited William Wilberforce to act as its political mouthpiece in Parliament. The first Bill to abolish the slave trade was introduced in the House of Commons in 1791 by Wilberforce but it was rejected. The following year the House of Commons voted in favour of abolishing the slave trade but the bill was rejected by the House of Lords. Despite several more failed attempts the abolitionists persevered and finally, in 1807, helped in large part by the successful revolution in Haiti the British Parliament passed an Act on the 25th March abolishing the transatlantic slave trade in British colonies. Although this ended the transportation of Africans across the Atlantic, it did not stop other European countries trading nor did it end the institution of slavery itself. It was not until 1833 that an Act of Parliament was passed which, when it became law in 1834, ended slavery itself. Even then, full emancipation was not realized until 1838 when a period of apprenticeship failed.

The British Pro-slavery movement

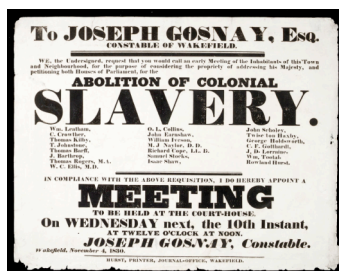
For nearly 200 years many plantation owners and politicians were successful in their opposition to ending the slave trade, and in delaying any movement to ending the slave trade. Olaudah Equiano was constantly in a war of words with James Tobin, who had been a member of His Majesty's council on the island of Nevis and supported slavery. Gordon Turnbull wrote a sixty-four page 'Apology for Negro Slavery' (1786) arguing that the supporters of slavery, and not the abolitionists were the true men of feeling. Equiano wrote a letter to Turnbull refuting his claims.

The British anti-slavery movement

In May 1787 a group of men met at 2, George Yard in East London and founded of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade where the minutes recorded 'the said Trade was both impolitick and unjust'. The group was mainly made up of Quakers who already had a century of experience as a pressure group. They mobilized their existing networks, and shaped the campaign, but relied on figureheads such as Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce from the established Anglican faith to bring the cause to wider mainstream attention. (Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade became is the world's oldest Human Rights Charity, now called Anti-Slavery International.)

Mass mobilization

What is remarkable about the development of the anti-slavery campaign is that large numbers of people became outraged over issues of human rights. Due in part to the skills of the abolitionists who drew connections between local and global inequities. At this time 19 out of 20 Englishmen and all Englishwomen were not even allowed to vote. Abolitionists demonstrated what lay behind the sugar, tobacco and coffee used and enjoyed by the British population. They campaigned against slave trade using leaflets, posters, petitions, pin badges, and boycotts.



Advertising bill for abolition

The success of these campaigns is evidenced by the fact that as early as 1792, after the first abolition bill to Parliament was defeated, it is estimated 400,000 Britons refused to eat slave-grown sugar. This action was initiated and carried out by women and it quickly swept across the country. Many did abstain from using plantation grown sugar during the abolition period but many

also switched to using East Indian grown sugar as a substitute. Others made the sacrifice to add their weight to the abolitionist movement. In the course of the campaign Parliament was flooded by far more signatures on petitions against slavery than on any other subject, and often the number of signatures totalled half a million. Every major town and city had an anti-slavery movement linked to London.



Abolition sugar bowl

As the main buyers and consumers of sugar, women came to play an important role in the anti-slavery campaign, particularly between 1807 and 1838 when they grew impatient with the male dominated societies gradual approach to ending slavery and campaigned for immediate emancipation [click to go to background information Emancipation].

Freed slaves and their involvement in the movement

The anti-slavery movement in Britain was a largely white enterprise, however there were a number of freed slaves who contributed significantly to the effectiveness of the abolitionist campaign, although not always in partnership. The upper class leaders of both Parliament and the Anti-Slavery Committee might have been moved by sympathy for the enslaved, but they were not motivated by the issue of equality.

Quobna Ottobah Cugoano was the first black voice to be heard when he published the first directly abolitionist book in English by an African in 1787, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (possibly assisted by Equiano). He was progressive in his approach, challenging the abolitionist line of only seeking to abolish the trade in slaves and called for the end of slavery itself: *'I would propose that...universal emancipation of slaves should begin'*, Cugoano.

Olaudah Equiano wrote about his life experiences of capture, slavery and freedom and in 1789 he published *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus the African* as well as campaigning for abolition. Members of the official Anti Slavery Committee (except Granville Sharp) showed little interest in Equiano and did not campaign alongside him. But he became the principal spokesman of Britain's African communities and thereby represented another important constituency who opposed the slave trade.

Mary Prince who came to Britain later in the course of the abolition campaign in 1828 was one free slave who did work with the Anti Slavery Society. A Quaker, Susanna Strickland documented her life story in 1831 and *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave* became an important part of the abolitionists' campaign. Mary Prince was the first woman to present an anti-slavery petition to Parliament.

Although the black voice was heard through individuals in Britain, the actions of the enslaved in resisting and rebelling against slavery in the colonies contributed more to bringing about an end to slavery. It is important to note that there are few historical records relating to the role of Africans in the abolition of the transatlantic slave, due in part to the way in which elements of the history were selected for documentation.

Am I not a man and a brother?

The image of an African man kneeling and in chains raising, his hands in supplication to be freed was designed by a craftsman working for renowned ceramicist Josiah Wedgwood, who brought what we would now call marketing and public relations acumen to the abolitionist campaign. Designed initially as a seal for closing envelopes, the image became used ubiquitously as a logo for the abolitionists



Commemorative seal, 1787

It was used on publications, as well as on snuff boxes, tea sets and cufflinks. Women wore the medallions as jewellery to show their support for the cause. They later adapted the image to show a kneeling female with the words ‘Am I not a woman and a sister?’

This passive view of Africans suited the religious fervour and moral campaign of the white abolitionists to generate sympathy and support based on helping the downtrodden, rather than creating an attitude of equality for all.

Anti-abolition

The impact of the transatlantic slave trade in creating a major economy meant there was significant opposition to abolition. Liverpool was particularly pro-slavery and John Tarleton a leading slave-trader spent over 3 hours in 1788 trying to persuade Prime Minister Pitt that abolition would bring ‘total ruin’. As well as the port cities, anti-abolition sentiments were evident in urban centres such as Birmingham and Manchester and the North West where jobs depended on manufacturing goods for export or processing the imported raw products (particularly cotton in Lancashire). When it appeared that the 1807 bill would be passed, 439 mill owners in Manchester petitioned against it to Parliament and within a few hours a counter-petition of 2354 names was presented.

Despite the 1807 the Act of Parliament African people were still forced into slavery. A quarter of all Africans who were enslaved between 1500-1870 were in fact transported across the Atlantic after 1807.

British Campaigners

William Wilberforce is often presented as the most important abolitionist, rather than the political agitator of the abolitionist movement. He was, in fact recruited by Thomas Clarkson and the Abolition Committee. He was an eloquent speaker. He was MP for Hull, then Yorkshire, wealthy and politically independent. As Hull was not a slaving port taking a stand against slavery was not a political risk. Moreover as a mainstream Anglican, part of the Establishment, he gave legitimacy to the efforts of the more peripheral Quakers. Wilberforce’s gentle nature was profoundly conservative on all other issues other than slavery. He was against wider electoral reform, and he opposed women's involvement in the Anti Slavery Society. *‘For ladies to meet, to publish, to go from house to house stirring up petitions – these appear to me proceedings unsuited to the female character as delineated in Scripture. I fear its tendency would be to mix them in all the multiform warfare of political life’* (1826).

Thomas Clarkson, by contrast, was not just involved in the anti-slavery movement, he was its *‘moral steam-engine’* according to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and he dedicated his life to the cause. But Clarkson the agitator needed Wilberforce the insider and their friendship and work together lasted nearly 50 years. Clarkson had his father’s passion for looking after the poor (his clergyman father died after visiting the sick when Clarkson was 6). He was a 25-year old Cambridge student when in 1785 he entered a prestigious Latin essay competition answering the question ‘Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?’ Clarkson won the competition – and as he revealed the true inhumanity of the transatlantic slave trade so he realized that someone must be determined to fight for its abolition.. Clarkson became the movement’s only full-time organizer. He traveled 35,000 miles between 1787 and 1794, mostly on horseback, visiting ports such as Bristol, Liverpool, Whitehaven and London, gathering information (a risky business as owners and ship captains made efforts to curtail any threat against to their commercial endeavours). He built up a case against the slavery and the Middle Passage, interviewed over 20,000 sailors and collecting artefacts to illustrate the brutality, such as thumb screws, handcuffs, leg-shackles, jaw

Activity: West African History - What was Africa like in 1500s?

clamps (for forced feeding) and branding irons used on the slave ships and on the plantations. He also collected goods made in West Africa, such as ivory, cloth, pepper and woods, to demonstrate the fact that the African peoples were in fact equal and to build a case for the need to enter in dialogue with West Africans to develop legitimate trade He carried this case with him at all times.

Clarkson began to receive death threats as a result of his activities and Alexander Falconbridge, the former slave ship surgeon, began to accompany him on his travels as a bodyguard.

Abolitionists successfully petitioned Parliament to withdraw a tax on cotton cloth and they applied the same approach to ending the slave trade. 10,000 people in Manchester signed the petition against slavery (20% of the population).

Ending the slave trade and ending slavery

The success of the anti-slavery campaign in ending the slave trade in 1807 did not end the abolitionist activities. If anything, the movement and the number of voices involved (particularly of women) gained momentum over the next 30 years. Further successful uprisings took place in Barbados in 1816, Demerara (Guyana) in 1823 and Jamaica in 1831-32 which severely affected these sugar colonies. These revolts, and others, played a critical part in forcing the anti-slavery movements in Britain to move from simply banning the trade in slaves in 1807 to bringing to an end the institution of slavery in 1833.