



# Quakers and the path to abolition in Britain and the colonies

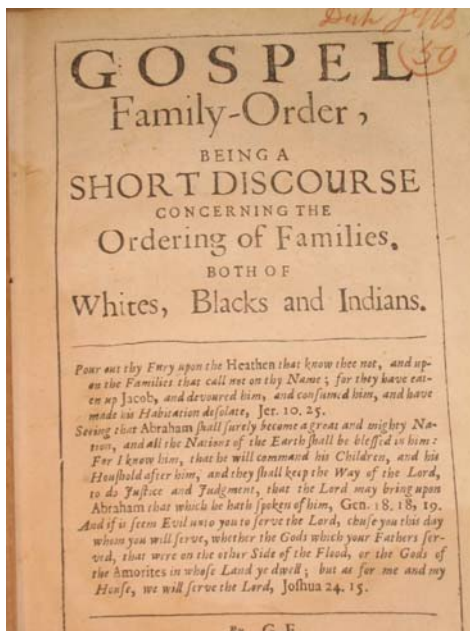
The campaign to end the slave trade can be traced back to a handful of Quakers (members of the Religious Society of Friends, also known as Friends) in the late 1600s, at a time when very few questioned the rightness of slavery. Quakers saw the trade as a violation of a fundamental belief that everyone is equal in the sight of God. No person has the right to own another.

The British anti-slavery campaign was the first large-scale national campaign devoted to a single cause. This online exhibition from the Library of the Religious Society of Friends illustrated with documents from its collections highlights some of the key events in the Quaker history of opposition to slavery and the slave trade that led up to the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807.

## Quaker protests against slavery in the 17<sup>th</sup> century

As early as 1657, George Fox the founder of Quakerism in a letter of caution *To Friends beyond the sea, that have Blacks and Indian slaves* reminded Quaker slave owners that everyone was equal in the sight of God.

After visiting Barbados in 1671 he later wrote that slaves should be better treated, and pointed out that the slave-owners would not like it if they were treated so cruelly. But he didn't go so far as to condemn slave holding. This was later published as 'Gospel Family-Order, Being a Short Discourse Concerning the Ordering of Families, both of Whites, Blacks and Indians' (1676).



*'...if you were in the same condition as the Blacks are...now I say, if this should be the condition of you and yours, you would think it hard measure, yea, and very great Bondage and Cruelty. And therefore consider seriously of this, and do you for and to them, as you would willingly have them or any other to do unto you...were you in the like slavish condition.'*

George Fox, 1676

Title page of: *Gospel Family Order...1676* [Box 29/16]

In the same year, 1676, William Edmundson, an Irish Quaker also spoke out against slavery. During the late 1600s and into the early 1700s several other Quakers began to do likewise, such as George Keith and William Southeby.

The schismatic George Keith (1638 – 1716) was a vigorous pamphleteer who had visited America and seen slavery first-hand. In 1693, two years before his disownment by Friends, he wrote *An exhortation and caution to Friends concerning the buying and selling of Negroes*.

Three years later the American Quaker William Southeby (with whom William Edmundson had stayed on his visit to Philadelphia) demanded a ban on slave ownership and importation. He continued to publish attacks on slavery until his death in 1720, and is credited with being the first native-born, white American to condemn slavery.

### **Early colonial Quakers protest against slavery**

The first public protest by Quakers against slavery took place in 1688 in Germantown, Pennsylvania when a group of German Quakers of Pietist origins drew up a formal remonstrance against the notion that one person can own another, the so-called 'Germantown Protest'. It said in part: *'Now, tho' they are black, we cannot conceive there is more liberty to have them slaves, as it is to have other white ones...And those who steal or rob men, and those who buy or purchase them, are they not all alike?'*

In 1696 Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting of Quakers made the first official, corporate pronouncement against the slave trade when it wrote a minute urging Quaker merchants and traders to *'write abroad to their correspondents that they send no more Negroes to be disposed of'* [sold]. Between 1674 and around 1710, many Maryland Quakers freed their slaves, either by wills or deeds of manumission. But many others continued to hold and trade in slaves and the institution of slavery became a divided issue amongst Friends.

### **Influence of colonial Quakers on Friends in Britain**

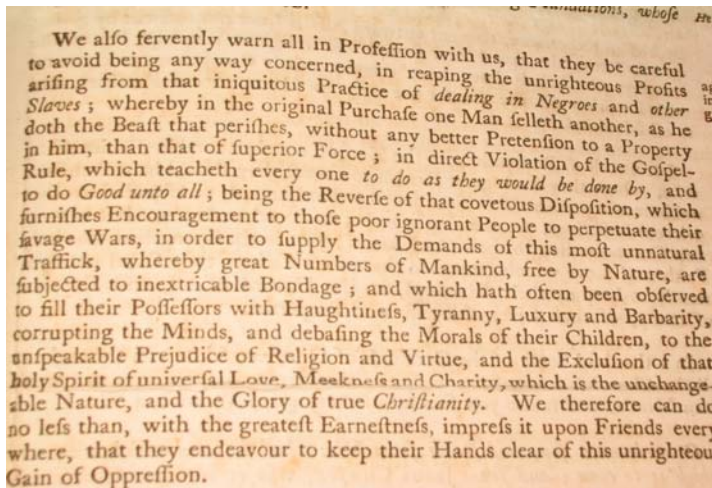
The origins of the Quaker anti-slavery movement in Britain lie in the transatlantic connection with North America, and especially Philadelphia. Quakers from Britain first visited America in the 1650s, and from the 1680s following the founding of Pennsylvania by William Penn many emigrated there. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century many Quakers in America were either British born or first generation American, and connections with Quakers in Britain were very close. London Yearly Meeting (today known as Britain Yearly Meeting) was the parent organisation and so colonial Quakers turned to it for advice and instruction.

The number of African slaves imported to America increased in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and for several years Quakers in America opposed to slavery put pressure on London Yearly Meeting to take decisive action, and regularly sent minutes and epistles across the Atlantic. Debate and discernment ensued – some Friends were involved in the slave trade and many owned slaves, and needed persuading.

Finally in 1727 London Yearly Meeting officially expressed its disapproval of the slave trade outright.

*'It is the sense of this meeting, that the importing of negroes from their native country and relations by friends, is not a commendable nor allowed practice, and is therefore censured by this meeting.'*

London Yearly Meeting, 25<sup>th</sup> 3 month 1727 [Volume 6 /457-458] and included in Quaker faith & practice 23.24 (2005)



We also fervently warn all in Profession with us, that they be careful to avoid being any way concerned, in reaping the unrighteous Profits arising from that iniquitous Practice of dealing in Negroes and other doth the Beast that perishes, without any better Pretension to a Property in him, than that of superior Force; in direct Violation of the Gospel-Rule, which teacheth every one to do as they would be done by, and to do Good unto all; being the Reverse of that covetous Disposition, which furnishes Encouragement to those poor ignorant People to perpetuate their savage Wars, in order to supply the Demands of this most unnatural Traffick, whereby great Numbers of Mankind, free by Nature, are subjected to inextricable Bondage; and which hath often been observed to fill their Possessors with Haughtiness, Tyranny, Luxury and Barbarity, corrupting the Minds, and debasing the Morals of their Children, to the unspeakable Prejudice of Religion and Virtue, and the Exclusion of that holy Spirit of universal Love, Meekness and Charity, which is the unchangeable Nature, and the Glory of true Christianity. We therefore can do no less than, with the greatest Earnestness, impress it upon Friends every where, that they endeavour to keep their Hands clear of this unrighteous Gain of Oppression.

Epistle of London Yearly Meeting, 1758 [Volume 11 /374]

In 1758 London Yearly Meeting issued the first of a series of denunciations of the slave trade stating, that it was 'in direct Violation of the Gospel Rule, which teacheth every one to do as they would be done by, and to do Good unto all ... We therefore can do no less than, ... impress it upon Friends every where, that they endeavour to keep their Hands clear of this unrighteous Gain of Oppression.'

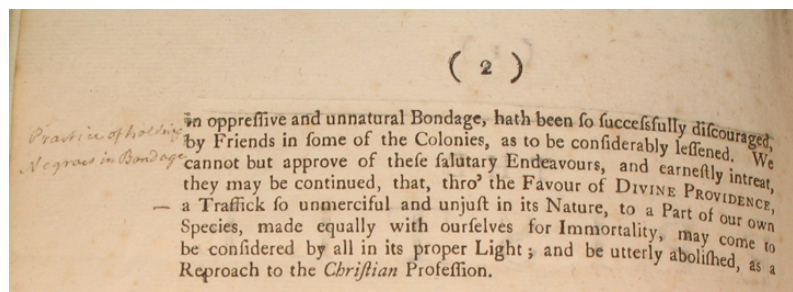
At last in 1761 London Yearly Meeting banned the owning of slaves, and any Quaker who didn't comply was disowned.

*'that the slave trade is a practice repugnant to our Christian profession and to deal with such as shall persevere in a conduct so reproachful to Christianity, and to disown them, if they desist not therefrom'*

London Yearly Meeting, 5<sup>th</sup> 5 month 1761

The Society had made slave-owning and slave-dealing a disownable offence amongst Quakers in Britain and the American colonies. It had been a slow process, but British and American Friends had worked together for a common aim.

Free now from all involvement in the slave trade itself London Yearly Meeting made the Society's first corporate public statement in 1772, calling for the practice of holding of slaves to be 'utterly abolished'.



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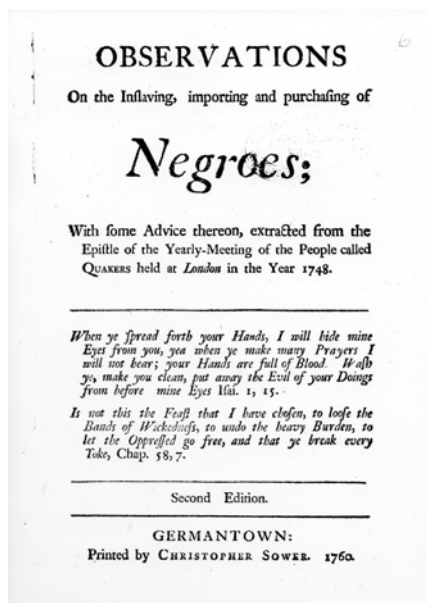
Practice of holding Negroes in Bondage

An oppressive and unnatural Bondage, hath been so successfully discouraged, by Friends in some of the Colonies, as to be considerably lessened. We cannot but approve of these salutary Endeavours, and earnestly intreat, they may be continued, that, thro' the Favour of DIVINE PROVIDENCE, — a Traffick so unmerciful and unjust in its Nature, to a Part of our own Species, made equally with ourselves for Immortality, may come to be considered by all in its proper Light; and be utterly abolished, as a Reproach to the Christian Profession.

Epistle of London Yearly, 1772 and [Volume 14 /384] included in Quaker faith & practice 23.25 (2005)

Present at the Yearly Meeting was John Woolman (1720 – 1772) from New Jersey, one of the best-known advocates of the anti-slavery cause; a Quaker whose beliefs and writings still resonate with Friends today. Since his early 20s Woolman had lived under concern against the wickedness of slavery, and had lived his life testifying to it.

Over a number of years he had gradually convinced Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the harm caused by slavery, which in turn put pressure on London Yearly Meeting.



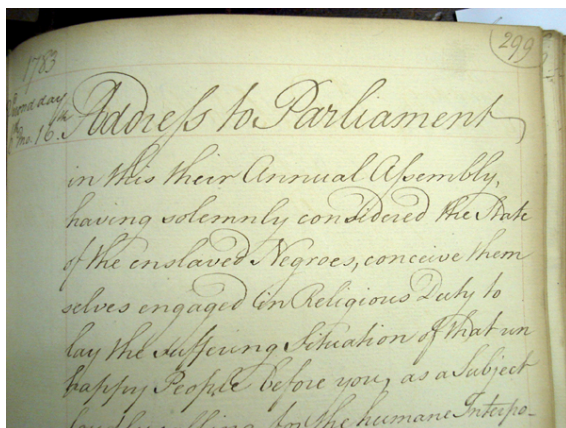
Another who influenced British Friends was Anthony Benezet (1713 – 1784). In 1759 he wrote *Observations on the inslaving, importing and purchasing the Negroes* which was the first publication to go beyond appeals to natural law or religion by using narratives of slave traders and other eyewitnesses. A few years later he wrote two important works that were influential in raising the interest of the British public against slavery. The first in 1766 was *A Caution and warning to Great Britain and her colonies on the calamitous state of the enslaved negroes* which was widely distributed in Britain. This was followed in 1771 by *Some historical account of Guinea: its situation, produce and the general disposition of its inhabitants*; a book on which Thomas Clarkson drew heavily to write his essay on slavery in 1785.

Title page of: *Observations on the Inslaving, Importing and Purchasing of Negroes...* 1760 [Box 6 /1]

Having changed attitudes within the Society and practised what they advocated, Friends could now turn all their efforts to the much bigger task of changing society at large. Recognising that Britain remained the key to closing down the slave trade and that it could only be done through legislation, American Quakers urged their British counterparts to petition Parliament.

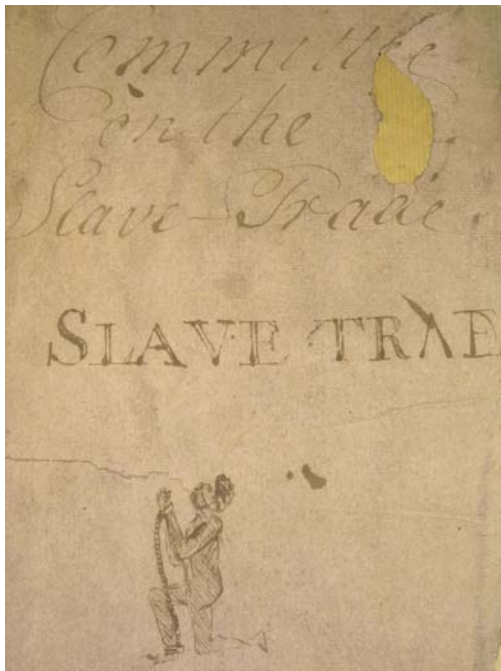
## Quakers initiate the abolition movement in Britain

In June 1783, Friends became aware that a Bill relating to the slave trade was before the House of Commons. Friends were at their annual gathering in London, and seizing this opportunity, on June 17 1783 London Yearly Meeting presented to Parliament the first petition against the slave trade signed by 273 Quakers.



The original petition no longer exists, but its text survives in the Yearly Meeting minutes, with a complete list of signatories.

London Yearly Meeting minutes, 1783 [Volume 17 /298-307]



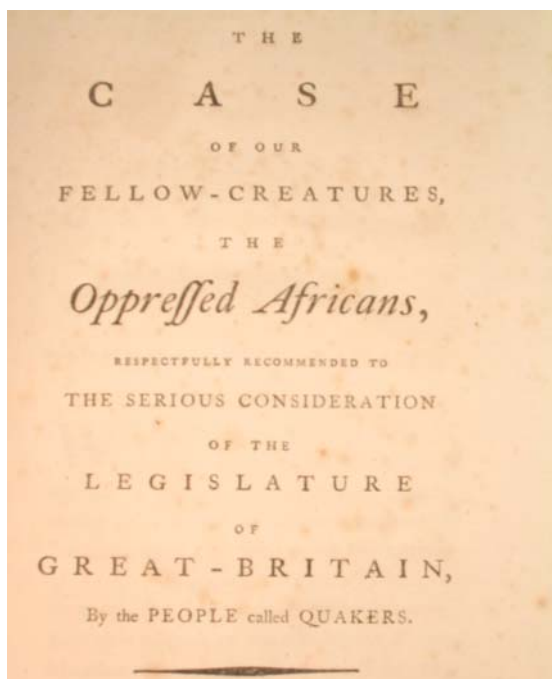
Cover of minute book of the Meeting for Sufferings Committee on Slave Trade, 1783 – 1792  
[MS Box F1 /7]

Three days later, Meeting for Sufferings set up a 23-member committee - the Committee on the Slave Trade to 'embrace all opportunities to promote the intention of the Yearly Meeting respecting the slave trade' and 'to obtain and publish "such information as may tend to the abolition of the slave trade'. This committee was Britain's first anti-slavery organisation.

A few weeks later in July 1783 six Friends met informally as a separate group to enlighten the public mind on the slave trade. They did this by sending anti-slavery articles to the newspapers, and lobbying Members of Parliament and other notables.

These Quaker abolitionists were ordinary people, who recognised that the trade was a violation of their fundamental belief in the equality of all human beings – and decided to do something about it. They included a physician, chemist, tinplate worker, printer, conveyancer, linen-bleacher, weaver, woollen draper, maltster, cutler, and surgeon.

William Dillwyn and John Lloyd who were members of both the official and informal committees prepared a short address to the public that was published in December 1783 as *The Case of our fellow- creatures, the oppressed Africans respectfully recommended to the serious consideration of the legislature of Great Britain by the people called Quakers.*



2,000 copies were originally published, and a further 10,000 copies in 1784. It was distributed to every member of parliament, the royal family and other notables, and 'as generally as may be throughout the nation', especially to anyone who might have influence.

title page of : *The Case of our Fellow-Creatures, the Oppressed Africans...* 1783 [Box 32 /62]

This series of actions by Quakers - getting articles printed in the press, sending a short address to MPs, and petitioning

Parliament were effectively the first organised lobbying activities in Britain for abolition. Unfortunately, they met with limited success, probably because Quakers were still regarded with an element of suspicion. Friends realised they needed to connect with the now growing number of abolitionists from other denominations.

Between 1785 and 1787 the associations between Quakers and Granville Sharp developed, and also with another Anglican, Thomas Clarkson. Anthony Benezet and Granville Sharp already knew each other as they had been in correspondence since 1772 and had re-printed each other's anti-slavery tracts on either side of the Atlantic.

Thomas Clarkson's introduction to the Quaker abolitionists came through Granville Sharp who introduced him to James Phillips, the Quaker printer and a member of the official Quaker committee.

In 1786 the Committee on the Slave Trade agreed to publish the English translation of Clarkson's prize-winning Latin essay, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African, translated from a Latin Dissertation, which was honoured with the first prize in the University of Cambridge, for the year 1785, With additions.*

On 22 May 1787 Sharp, Clarkson, another Anglican Philip Sansom, and nine Quakers formed the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (also known as the Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade). In need of a Parliamentary spokesman, the Evangelical William Wilberforce was approached (Quakers were barred from Parliament until 1828).

Although Wilberforce became the public figurehead of the campaign, it would not have succeeded without the unceasing work of Clarkson (described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a "moral steam-engine") who took on the essential task of collecting every possible source of evidence, together with the behind-the-scenes work of Quakers who gave financial support and utilised their network of contacts which helped initiate local activism up and down the country.

Wilberforce introduced his first Bill to abolish the slave trade in 1791, but it was rejected. For the next 20 years he continued regularly to propose legislation for abolition, and anti-slavery campaigners continued to fight. Anti-slavery literature was distributed nationwide and public opinion stirred, a network of anti-slavery societies sprang up all over the country, and petitions were organised and sent to parliament. It was the first time that such community action had lobbied for legislative change.

It goes without saying that many Quakers were involved in these local anti-slavery societies and united with other men and women in their local community to promote the anti-slavery cause.

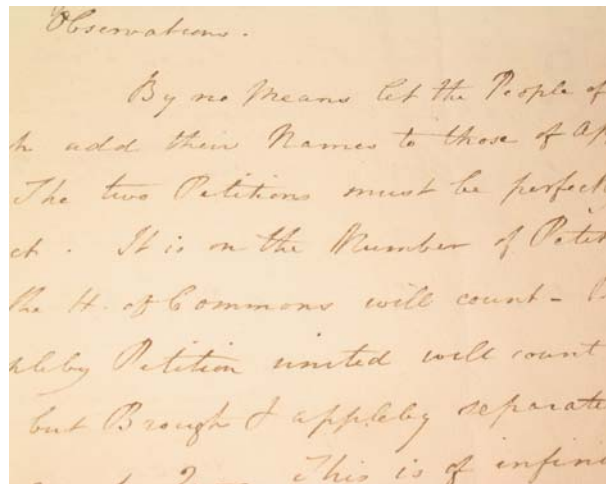
### **Lobbying activities**

The anti-slavery campaign was remarkable for the way it mobilized huge numbers of the British population into mass action, and brought to the fore an issue of human rights. Much of this was down to the skills of the abolitionists who used tactics we now take for granted in modern day campaigning such as mass petitioning, distributing leaflets, organising meetings, poster campaigns, the use of logos and slogans, consumer action, and the lobbying of MPs.

## Petitioning

Petitions to Parliament were a clear way that people could voice their opposition to the slave trade and showed how many opposed it. There were two major campaigns – the first in 1788, in which over 100 petitions were presented to Parliament in the space of three months and another in 1792 when 519 were presented to Parliament. This was the greatest number ever received on one subject in a single session. The abolitionists well understood how to use these campaigning tactics, as evidenced by a letter from Thomas Clarkson to Thomas Wilkinson in Cumbria on 1 March 1792 giving him instructions on the sending of petitions.

*“By no means let the People of Brough add their names to those of Appleby – the two petitions must be perfectly distinct. It is on the number of petitions that the H[ouse] of Commons will count – Brough and Appleby petition united will count but 1 – but Brough and Appleby separate will count 2. This is of infinite importance to the Cause.”*



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Letter from Thomas Clarkson to Thomas Wilkinson  
1 March 1792 [TEMP MSS 128/14 (Wilkinson MSS)]

## Imagery and slogans

At the request of the London Committee in 1787 the potter Josiah Wedgwood produced a medallion with the image of an African man kneeling and in chains with the motto 'Am I not a Man and a Brother?'. It was widely copied (or variations of it) and appeared over and over again on a range of items, such as seals, cufflinks, teasetts and even women's jewellery and accessories. It effectively became the emblem for the movement.



Joseph and Elizabeth Taylor of Middlesborough owned this cup in the 1820s. It was given to the Library in 1916 by their grand-daughter Margaret Graham, who recalled being told that the tea-set of which this is a survivor was purchased with money saved when the whole family gave up sugar in protest against slavery. One side of the cup shows a transfer print of the kneeling slave image and the other side has a reference to the Bible, Hebrews 13:3 *Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them...*

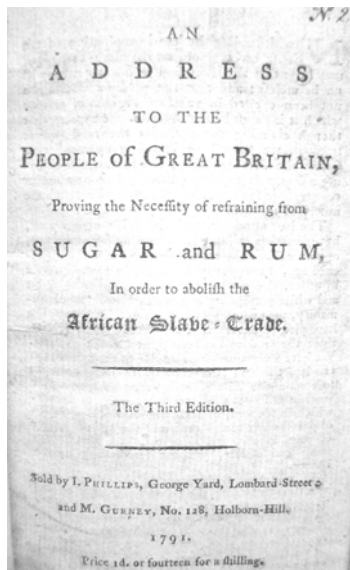
In 1789 700 copies of the print of the slave ship 'Brookes' were printed by the Quaker printer James Phillips. Showing sections of the ship and the inhumane way in which slaves were stowed, this drawing and variations on it became one of the most iconic and shocking images of the movement.



This close-up of one such diagram was included in the Portuguese edition of an anti-slavery tract called 'Cries of Africa to the inhabitants of Europe' written by Thomas Clarkson.

From: *Cries of Africa to the inhabitants of Europe* [sr 051.6.A2 Volume 13 /5]

## Boycotting



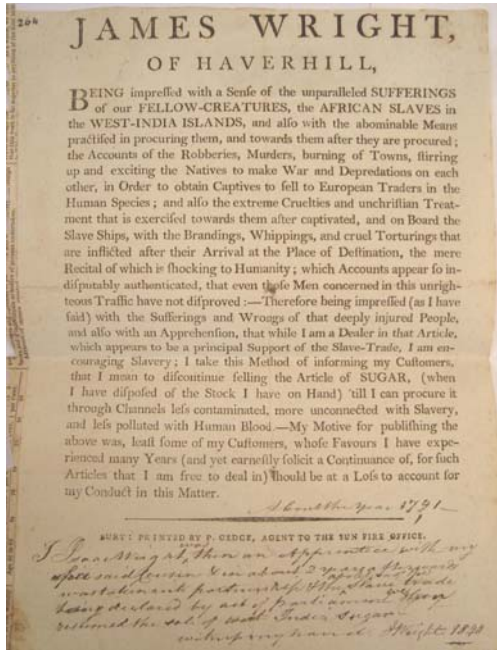
Many abolitionists understood the connection between goods produced using slave labour in the West Indies and the British consumer market, and realised that if consumer demand for sugar diminished it might hasten the end of the slave-trade. People were therefore urged not to purchase sugar that was produced in the West Indies. By 1792 it was estimated that up to 400,000 Britons were refusing to eat slave-grown sugar.

This classic anti-sugar pamphlet is generally accredited to William Fox (fl. 1791-1813). First published in 1791 it ran to at least 25 editions.

Title page of: *An address to the People of Great Britain...* 1791 [SR051.6.A2 Volume 18 /1]



It is believed that James Wright (1739 – 1811), a Quaker and merchant of Haverhill, Suffolk issued this handbill around 1791 informing his customers that he would no longer be selling sugar. He declares

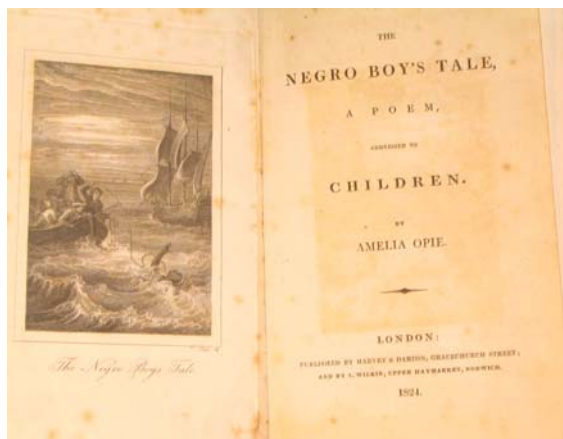


*“.....Therefore being impressed (as I have said) with the Sufferings and Wrongs of that deeply injured People, and also with an Apprehension, that while I am a Dealer in that Article, which appears to be a principal Support of the Slave-Trade, I am encouraging Slavery; I take this Method of informing my Customers, that I mean to discontinue selling the Article of SUGAR, (when I have disposed of the Stock I have on hand) ‘till I can procure it through Channels less contaminated, more unconnected with Slavery, and less polluted with Human Blood.....”*

Handbill of James Wright of Haverhill [Box L176 /37]

## Role of women in the anti-slavery movement

The role of women in the campaign is remarkable because this was a section of the population still disenfranchised, yet they played an important role in one of the key social reforms in history. Women abolitionists who were active in the 1820s and 1830s, such as Elizabeth Heyrick, Anne Knight and Elizabeth Pease are well-known. But there were many Quaker women in the 1780s and 1790s who gave their support and campaigned, including Mary Birkett Card, Amelia Opie, Mary Morris Knowles. When the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was set up in 1787 it was an exclusively male organisation, yet its lists of subscribers included several women.



Women brought a distinctive female approach to the campaign, such as writing and circulating imaginative literature and poetry on slavery, such as *A Poem on the African Slave Trade. Addressed to her own sex* written in 1792 by Mary Birkett Card, and Amelia Opie's poem *The negro boys tale: a poem addressed to children*, first published in 1802.

Title page of: *The Negro Boy's Tale: a Poem...* 1824 [Box 202 /2]



In her writings Amelia Opie (1769 – 1853) a well known novelist and poet successfully wrote on humanitarian issues in a populist style. *The Negro Boy's Tale* was written for children, and writing to Joseph John Gurney in 1844 she said 'I believe simple moral tales the very best mode of instructing the young and the poor'.

Amelia Opie. Oil painting on canvas by Henry Perronet Briggs (1791 – 1844)

Women wore the medallion designed by Josiah Wedgwood as jewellery to show their support, and later adapted it to show a kneeling female with the words "Am I not a Woman and a Sister?". As the main purchasers of sugar they came to play an important role in the sugar boycott.

### **1807 and after**

Finally on 25 March 1807 the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act received its royal assent, thus abolishing the slave trade in the British colonies and making it illegal to carry slaves in British ships

However, the 1807 act abolished only the slave trade; slavery itself still continued in the British colonies. For a while the campaign lost some of its momentum but was revived in 1823 with the formation of the Anti-Slavery Society with the aim of freeing all slaves in the British colonies. Eventually the Slavery Abolition Act was passed on August 23 1833. But the act stated that slaves were not to be freed immediately, but were to become "apprentices" for 6 years before being completely freed. Protests against this forced the apprenticeship system to be abolished in 1838. The British government also provided £20 million in compensation to plantation owners in the Caribbean. It had taken 46 years between 1787 and 1833 for Britain to outlaw the slave trade and abolish slavery in her colonies.

The focus now shifted to outlawing slavery in other countries, and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century Quakers remained instrumental in the anti-slavery movement. Their participation was evident in various societies, both local, national and international. Birmingham Quaker, Joseph Sturge and his supporters founded the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in 1839. This proved to be the most enduring of all the British anti-slavery societies and survives today as Anti-Slavery International.



A selection of anti-slavery pamphlets published in the 1820's

The on-line exhibition is illustrated with items from the Library of the Religious Society of Friends. Quakers' long-standing and continuing concern against slavery is reflected in the Library's collections, which includes printed items, archives and manuscripts, pictures and artefacts relating to anti-slavery. For further information and details of how to access these collections see Library Guide 9 at [www.quaker.org.uk/1807](http://www.quaker.org.uk/1807)

If you have enjoyed these pages, and would like to make any comments, then please email [library@quaker.org.uk](mailto:library@quaker.org.uk).