



## BEYOND THE BICENTENNIAL – 1788-1838 EXPLORING 50 YEARS OF THE SLAVE TRADE

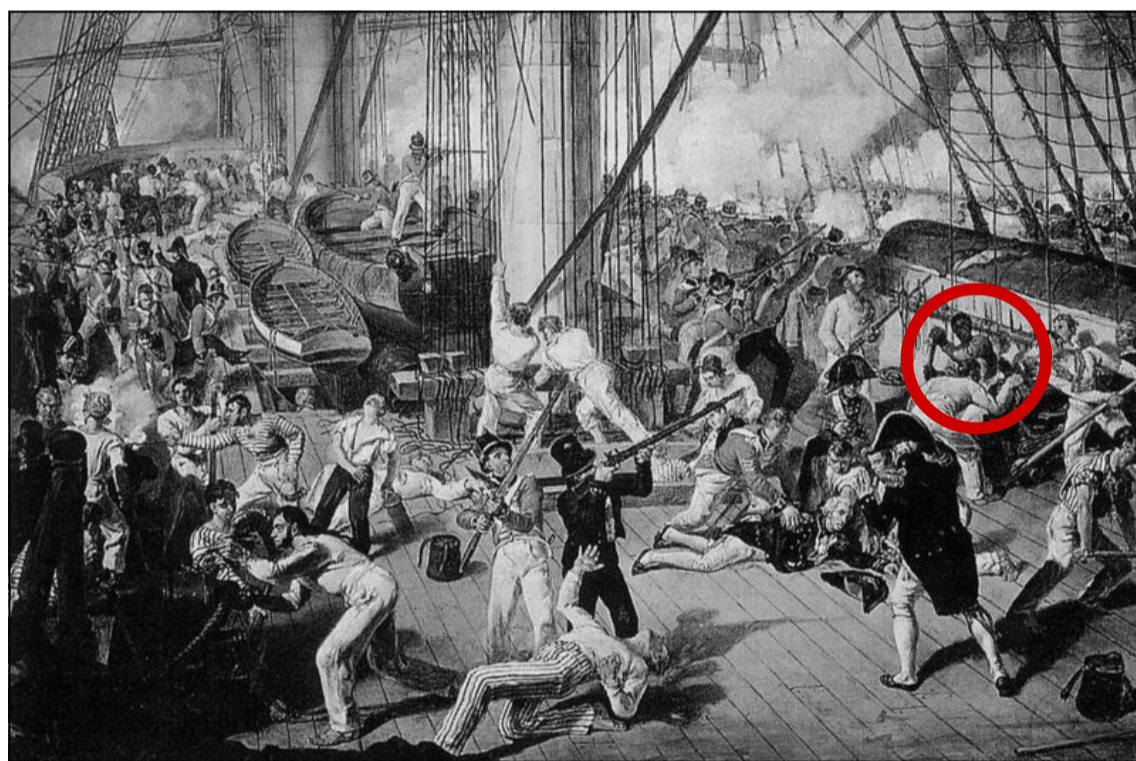
### BLACK COMMUNITIES IN BRITAIN IN 1807

Although Britain was a slave owning nation abroad, slavery was rare on the British mainland, being confined to ports like Liverpool. Many former slaves or Afro-Caribbean immigrants did settle in Britain during this period, and there were large black communities in the 18th century in many ports such as Bristol.

London had the largest black population in the 18th century, some historians have estimated that it was as many as 30,000 people in the mid 1700s. The black community seem to have integrated into the local community in this period and in many cases married into local families. Many people who can trace their family trees back to London in this period may find they have some black ancestors.

The black communities worked in many trades, some also went 'into service' as it was fashionable in the 1740s and 1750s for the gentry to have black servants. Some of these were even painted with their employers in portraits of the period, such as works by William Hogarth.

Many former slaves also found employment as sailors, particularly in the Royal Navy, which was very cosmopolitan. Of the 800 crew who served on HMS Victory at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, 22 nations were represented, including at least 10 Afro-Caribbean men. (If you look carefully you can see one in the picture on the right!) Even so, it was extremely rare for black sailors in this period to become officers.



### *Black Communities in Peterborough*

The earliest record of a black community in Peterborough goes as far back as 1711, with an entry in the Cathedral register of the marriage of 'John Sherwood a negro 3 foot high & Margaret Sherwood 2 foot & a half high, marry'd July 7th 1711'.

At the time of the abolition of slavery there were a number of black sailors captured fighting in the French navy imprisoned in the prisoner of war camp at Norman Cross, including 'Black Jimmy' who was connected with the making of obscene carvings and drawings in December 1808 and was sent to the prison hulks at Chatham.

A black Doctor, Joseph Watson Commissioning, who was born in Grenada in 1832, lived in Peterborough from about 1850 until his death in 1894, and had a medical practice in Millfield.



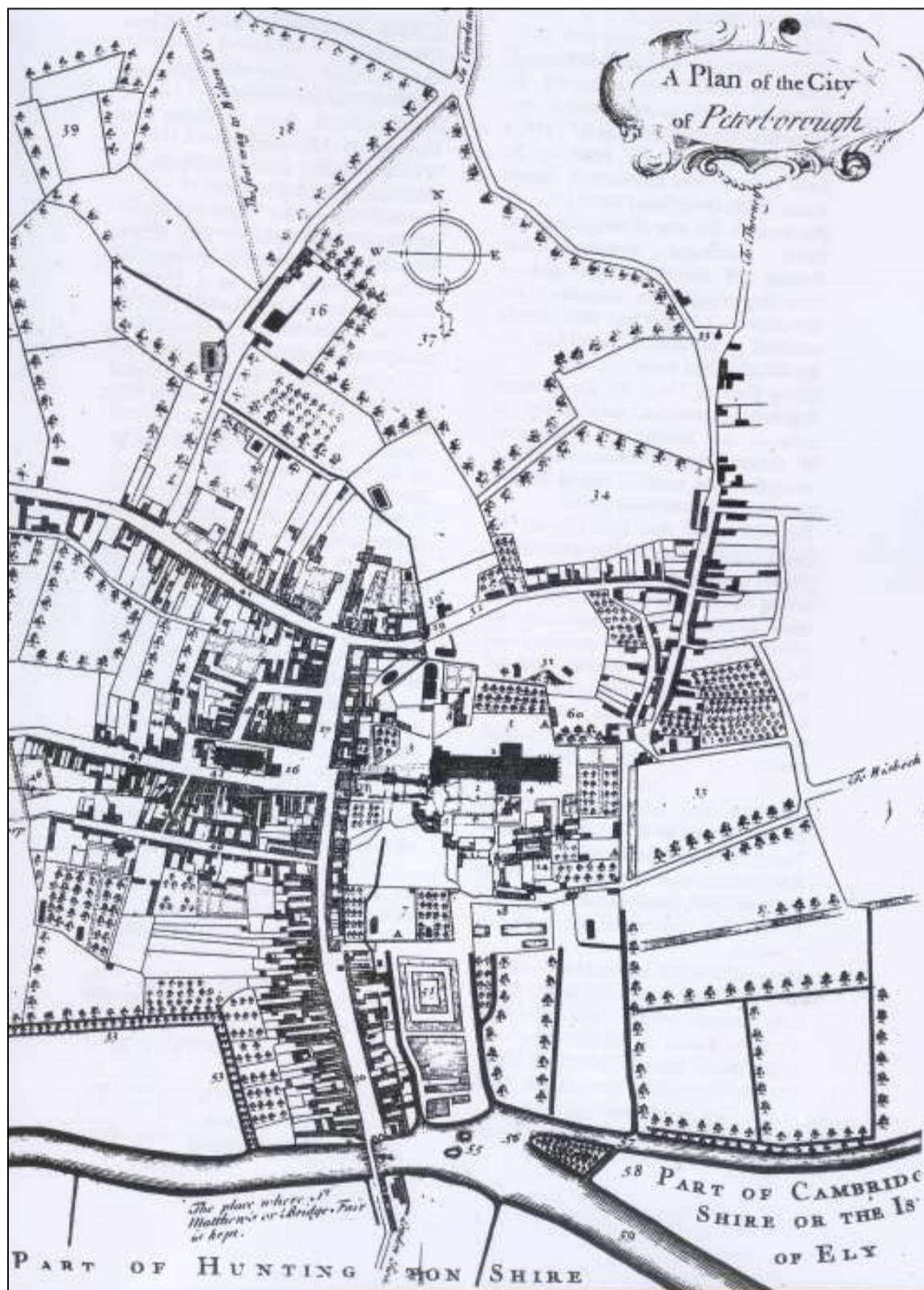
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### GEORGIAN PETERBOROUGH

Peterborough had become a bit of a backwater during the Georgian period. The town had suffered greatly during the Civil War and plague during the 17th century. In the 18th century Peterborough had been overtaken by nearby Stamford in importance, thanks to the fact it was the main changing post for horses on the mail coaches between London and York. Peterborough was seen as a provincial market town that happened to have a Cathedral.

Peterborough was much smaller in the early 1800s than it is today, as can be seen from Thomas Eayre's map of 1721 (right). In those days it was little bigger than the modern city centre, and the area had a population of less than 5,000 people. The villages to the south of the river such as Woodston and Orton Longueville were part of Huntingdonshire, nothing to do with the city at all. To the north much of what is now Peterborough either did not exist (such as Bretton) or were small villages (like Werrington and Northborough).

There were some well to do families such as Thomas Cooke, who in 1816 bought the house on this site and turned it into the grand Georgian house that you see today. His grandfather clock can still be seen in the ground floor corridor.



You will see next to that Grandfather clock a portrait of two children from the Squire family who lived in a grand house next to the river. The portrait also shows the old town bridge at this time.

At the time slavery was abolished in 1807, Peterborough had increased in importance thanks to the Norman Cross camp, the world's first prisoner of war camp, built in 1797 to house French prisoners of war captured in the wars against Napoleon. You can find out more about the story of the camp in the Norman Cross gallery on the top floor of the Museum.



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### THOMAS CLARKSON

Thomas Clarkson is the forgotten hero of the anti-Slave Trade movement. Most people think of William Wilberforce when they think about the campaign, because he fought for the cause in Parliament, but the anti-Slave Trade's driving force was Thomas Clarkson, a man from Wisbech.

He was born in the Cambridgeshire town in 1760 where his father was a vicar and headmaster of Wisbech Grammar School. While Thomas was studying at Cambridge University he wrote an essay which was to change the direction of his life. The essay asked if it was legal to force people into slavery. Shocked by his research, he had what he called "an inspiration from God" and decided he had to dedicate the rest of his life to ending the slave trade.

He helped to set up the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 with the MP William Wilberforce, who agreed to champion the anti-Slave Trade cause in Parliament.

Thomas spent the next years travelling around England. He interviewed sailors to find out how the slaves suffered on their journeys from Africa to the Americas. He held meetings for the public where he displayed the branding irons, thumb-screws and shackles used on the slaves.

In 1796 he married Catherine Buck and they had one son, also called Thomas. He always suffered from bad health and sometimes had to step back from his campaign work.

After years of hard work, the Slave Trade Abolition Act was passed by Parliament in 1807. Thomas then campaigned to abolish slavery altogether in the British empire, which finally happened in 1833. He spent the rest of his life supporting anti-Slavery campaigners in other countries.

William Wordsworth was so impressed by Thomas' achievements that he wrote a poem to him. He died in 1846 and is buried in Playford in Suffolk. In Wisbech he is remembered by the Thomas Clarkson Memorial.

So why is Thomas Clarkson less famous than William Wilberforce? In 1838 William's sons published a biography of their father which made him the big "hero" of the anti-Slave Trade campaign and reduced everyone else to minor players. Thomas' part was soon forgotten. In fact Thomas Clarkson the passionate campaigner and William Wilberforce the dedicated MP both played crucial roles.



John Sherwood a Negro 3 foot high &  
Margaret Sherwood 2 foot & a half high  
Marry'd July 7 1711

1711

1711

Record in Peterborough Cathedral's register of the marriage of 'John Sherwood a negro 3 foot high & Margaret Sherwood 2 foot & a half high, marry'd July 7th 1711'.