

Abolitionist Movements

**“The British were great slave traders before they were great abolitionists.”
James Walvin, Professor Emeritus, University of York**



History of the West Indies by Thomas Coke, London 1810 (Special Collections)

The Background

Although the principle of the slave trade was condemned by Elizabeth I, independent British traders transported enslaved Africans to America and the West Indies in their thousands. However, as so much financial profit was gained from the slave trade, no action was taken against this inhuman traffic. At the accession of Charles II in 1660 the slave trade was officially sanctioned in England. The Royal Africa Company (1672), whose stock and trade was the transportation of slaves, had James, Duke of York (later James II), as one of its principal directors.

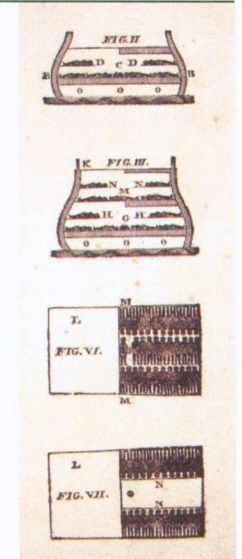


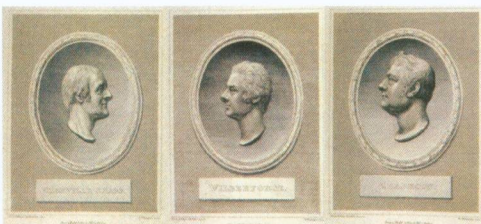
Illustration of human cargo from *Zimao, the African* translated by the Rev. Weeden Butler, 1807 (Special Collections)

Time for Change

There was a deep divide between those protecting their own interests and those who fought for human rights. In the American War of Independence (1776-1783) thousands of enslaved Africans fought on the side of the English believing they would be granted freedom. The French Revolution in 1789, based on the ideals of brotherhood, justice and equality for all, further fuelled the debate on the slave trade. The time was right for change.

Wilberforce, Sharp, Clarkson and the Lunar Society

Many prominent figures became involved in the fight against slavery, the most well known today being the MP and social reformer William Wilberforce. With him abolitionist and campaigner Granville Sharp fought to ensure the freedom of runaway slaves and to change the law in favour of their rights. For work on the ground, no one seemed to do more than Thomas Clarkson, who introduced Wilberforce to the issue of slavery and who, with Sharp, in 1783 founded the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. He tirelessly campaigned up and down the country and even survived an assassination attempt by those with a financial interest in perpetuating the slave trade.

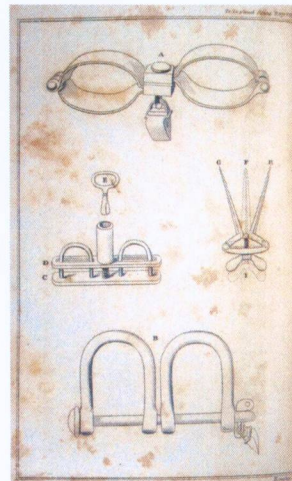


Poems on the Abolition on the Slave Trade by James Montgomery, London: Printed for R. Bowyer..., by T. Bensley, 1809 (Special Collections)

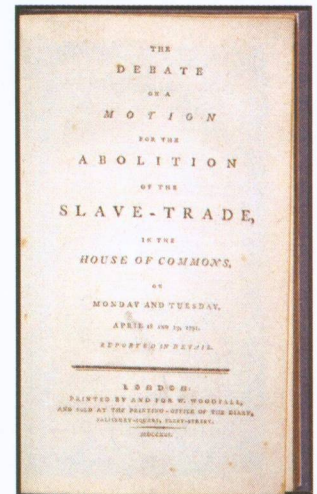
Birmingham's Involvement in Slavery

British ports thrived on the profits, and many inland cities, predominantly Birmingham, manufactured not only manacles and chains for the slave trade, but also trading items such as kettles, pots and weapons (around 150,000 guns were transported every year). This became derisively known as '*Brummagem ware*' - cheap, very low quality goods, made especially for the African market.

In 1789 a petition to Parliament from Birmingham industrialists made clear that the city had a powerful pro-slavery lobby. This petition was firmly against the anti-slavery movement. They wanted the House to take into consideration the fortune that would be lost through abolition and the thousands of people who would lose their jobs.



Manacles—illustration from Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the African Slave-Trade*, Vol. 1 (Special Collections)



(Special Collections)

Joseph Priestley's *Sermon Against the Slave Trade* was written in Birmingham in 1788. This Unitarian minister was a member of Birmingham's Lunar Society, a loosely associated group of late Eighteenth Century scientists, intellectuals, writers and industrialists, which also included Thomas Day, Erasmus Darwin, Matthew Boulton and James Watt.

The Lunar Society, which met regularly in Birmingham, is known for its role in the abolitionist movement, although not all members were supporters. Nevertheless, many were concerned that social progress was being hindered by the slave trade. It was one of their members, Josiah Wedgwood (the potter based at Stoke on Trent), who designed the famous 'Am I Not A Man and a Brother' medallion in 1787.