

Anti-slavery books in Norfolk collections

These books are by three very different protagonists in the fight against the enslavement of Africans: Olaudah Equiano, an educated former slave; Amelia Opie, the celebrated Norwich-born poet; and Member of Parliament Thomas Fowell Buxton. All three books, now in the Norfolk Heritage Centre at the Norfolk & Norwich Millennium Library, originally came from private Norfolk libraries. Equiano published his autobiography himself by subscription: this was a method which involved getting prospective buyers to pay for books before publication to cover the printing costs. That there were enough subscribers in Norwich for an edition of the book to be printed here shows that there was widespread local support for abolitionist ideas.

The well-known Norwich mustard manufacturer and philanthropist J.J. Colman owned a copy of Equiano's autobiography and Buxton's 1840 re-issue of *The African Slave Trade*, as well as other political pamphlets by Buxton and another anti-slavery children's poem by Opie called *A Negro Boy's Tale* (1824). Along with the rest of his library, they were donated to the city of Norwich by Sir Timothy Colman in 1954.

Olaudah Equiano c.1745-1797

The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African

Eighth edition, Norwich, 1794

Norfolk County Council Library and Information Service

Probably born in Nigeria, Equiano was kidnapped and taken to the Caribbean around the age of ten. His first owner, a Royal Navy officer, sent him to school in London. After he purchased his freedom in 1766, he travelled extensively and joined an exploration voyage to the North Pole, in which Horatio Nelson also took part. Equiano was even involved in setting up a plantation in Central America. He then settled in England,

where he wrote his autobiography and became involved with the abolitionist movement. Writing his story was partly his way to report the horrors of a slave's life, but also to demonstrate that he, an African and former slave, possessed the necessary intelligence to recount them eloquently in writing. This counteracted the pro-slavery argument that slaves were less than fully human. After the book was first published in 1789, Equiano went on a five-year-long book tour to promote it and its anti-slavery message.

Amelia Opie 1769-1853

The Black Man's Lament; or, How to Make Sugar

Harvey & Darton, London, 1826

Norfolk County Council Library and Information Service

A member of the British Anti-Slavery Society, Opie wrote two children's poems against slavery, this and *The Negro Boy's Tale* (first written in 1802 but published as a book in 1824). Told from the perspective of a slave, *The Black Man's Lament* is illustrated with graphic images of a slave's appalling life, including beatings and the 'middle passage', the horrific trip from Africa to the Caribbean. Opie's fictional slave says about this journey: 'Oh! happy those, who, in that hour / Die from their prison's putrid breath! / Since they escape from White man's pow'r, / From toils and strifes, and lingering death!' Opie's style can be seen as melodramatic, but she was praised during her lifetime for the pathos of her writing and her ability to move her readers.

Thomas Fowell Buxton 1786-1845

The African Slave Trade

John Murray, London, 1839

Norfolk County Council Library and Information Service

Buxton had won the Parliamentary battle for the abolition of slavery in 1833 and slaves in British dominions were finally emancipated in 1838. Yet, the following year he stated in this

book that 'all our gigantic efforts and costly sacrifices for the suppression of the Slave Trade have proved unavailing'. After he accepted Wilberforce's invitation to join the battle against slavery in 1822, the cause became a lifelong preoccupation for him. Buxton's contention, in this book, is that 'the sale [by Africans] of children, subjects, and neighbours, is the only means as yet afforded, by European commerce, for the supply of those wants which that commerce has created'. He urged the British Government to make anti-slave treaties with African rulers and, as a result, an expedition to the river Niger delta was launched in the summer of 1841. The project's failure through death and disease is said to have affected Buxton's health, who died at his Northrepps house in 1845.