

THE AGE OF ABOLITION

By the mid 18th century Britain was the world's foremost slave trading nation. British people in general accepted the trade and many viewed it as essential to Britain's prosperity.

‘SLAVERY... HAS HARDLY ANY POSSIBILITY OF BEING ABOLISHED... IT HAS BEEN UNIVERSALL IN THE BEGINNINGS OF SOCIETY, AND THE LOVE OF DOMINION AND AUTHORITY OVER OTHERS WILL PROBABLY MAKE IT PERPETUALL.’

Adam Smith, 1763.

Even people who had concerns about the cruelty and injustice of the slave trade believed that there was nothing they could do about it.

In the following years however, events, ideas and people came together to ignite a campaign that sought to achieve what had once seemed impossible - the abolition of the British slave trade, and eventually, within the British Empire, of slavery itself.

The fight for justice.

Notorious legal cases made public the injustice of treating human beings as property.

The Somerset case.

James Somerset was an escaped slave living in England who had been recaptured. Granville Sharp, an anti-slavery campaigner, attempted to free Somerset through the courts. The case came before Lord Chief Justice Mansfield. On 22 June 1772, Mansfield ruled that **'no master was ever allowed here to take a slave by force to be sold abroad.'** Somerset was freed, and his supporters celebrated. Although Mansfield did not declare that slavery in Britain was illegal, the case drew public attention to the inhumanity of enslaving people.



Granville Sharp. Sharp tried to use the law to free slaves in Britain. He was a founder member of the 1787 committee formed to campaign against the slave trade.

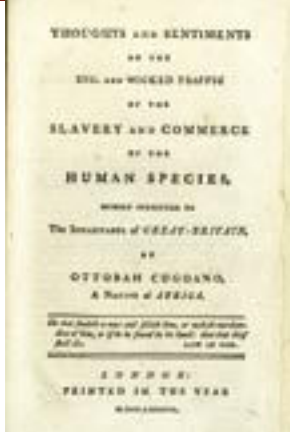
George Dance, c.1794. © National Portrait Gallery.



Slave Ship [Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On]. J.M.W. Turner, 1840. © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The Zong Case.

In 1782, the captain of the slave ship 'Zong' threw sick and dying African captives into the sea so that he could collect insurance money for slaves 'lost at sea'. The incident came to public notice only when the insurers contested the claim in court. Olaudah Equiano, the writer and abolitionist campaigner, alerted Granville Sharpe to the case, who tried to turn it into a murder trial. This idea was rejected by the judge, who said, **'it would be madness: the Blacks were property.'**

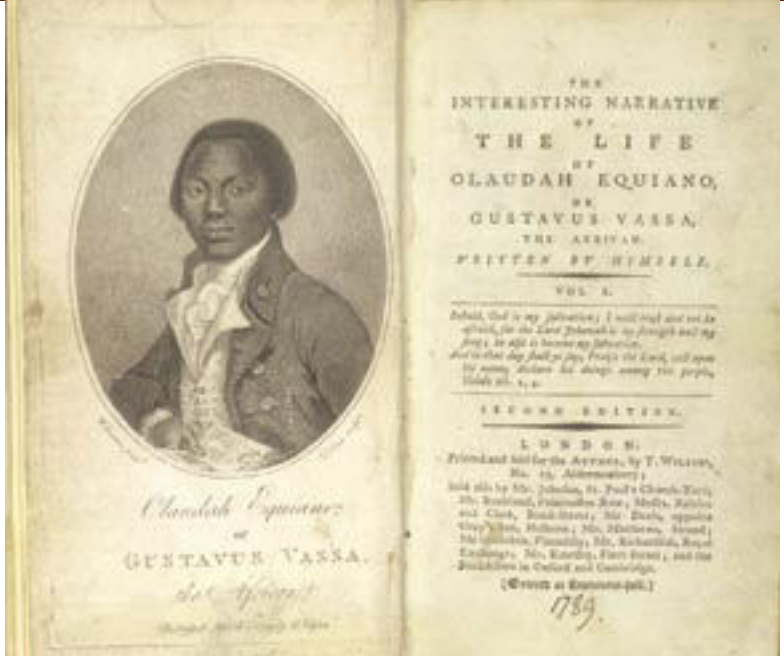


'Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species'. Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, 1787. © University of London.

Knowing the truth.

Africans living in Britain wrote about their experiences of the slave trade in best selling memoirs.

Quobna Ottobah Cugoano was an African who had been kidnapped and enslaved. He eventually came to England where he worked as a servant. He wrote a book in 1787 called Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species. It became a best seller, and was reprinted several times.



'The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African', 1789. © The British Library.

Olaudah Equiano published his autobiography in 1789 as The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African. It told how he was kidnapped from his home in West Africa, of his experiences as an enslaved person, how he freed himself, and his remarkable travels thereafter. This book was widely read and sold in huge numbers.

Both Equiano and Cugoano travelled Britain giving lectures and publicising their writings.



Jean-Baptiste Mars Belley (c.1747-1805). Belley was born in Senegal, West Africa. He was a former slave, but served as a French officer in St Domingue. He was elected to the French revolutionary government that abolished slavery. Belley later joined the Haitian rebellion led by Toussaint L'Ouverture and was deported to France in 1802.

Anne Louis Girodet de Roucy-Trioson, 1797.
© Photo RMN.

The religious conscience.

Was it against Christian principles to treat human beings as property?

The Society of Friends (the Quakers) had long been opposed to slavery and the slave trade. It was contrary to their belief in the equality of all people.

They published anti-slavery literature in the 1760s, and presented a petition against slavery to Parliament in 1783.

Other religious groups also opposed slavery. Evangelicals of the Church of England, like William Wilberforce and Hannah More, believed that true Christians should oppose the sinful practices that disfigured British national life.



Quakers believed that everyone was equal before God, therefore they should not remove their hats to social superiors. This image shows the congregation have kept their hats on.

Society of Friends Meeting at Gracechurch Street, c.1770s.
© Library of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain.

The idea of liberty.

Rebellions in the Caribbean challenged slavery.

In the 18th century ideas about human rights and liberty became widespread and inspired revolutions in America (1776), and France (1789). The successful slave rebellion in the French colony of St Dominigue, which began in 1791, demonstrated that slaves were also prepared to fight for freedom and equality.

For over 200 years there had been rebellions by enslaved Africans in the Caribbean. Many people in Britain were shocked and frightened by these events, but by the end of the 18th century they also began to question the military and human cost of enforcing slavery.



Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743-1803) led the successful slave revolt in 1791. The independence of 'Haiti', the first free black republic, was declared on January 1, 1804.

Portrait of Toussaint Louverture, early 19th century by French School.
© Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, France.



John Wesley (1703-1791). Celebrated preacher, evangelist and co-founder of Methodism. He preached an important sermon against the slave trade in Bristol in 1788.

© The Trustees of Wesley's Chapel.

THE CAMPAIGN GETS UNDERWAY

At a Meeting held for the purpose of taking the Slave Trade into Consideration, it was resolved that the said Trade was both impolitick and unjust.

Minutes of the first meeting of The Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 22 May, 1787.

In 1787 twelve like-minded men met at James Phillips's print workshop to begin the campaign against the slave trade. Of the twelve on that first committee, nine were Quakers, including Phillips the printer. He was to print and publish many of the numerous books and pamphlets that would be produced as part of the campaign.

The Quakers were experienced campaigners. They frequently had to mobilise to defend their beliefs and customs through petitions, publicity and by lobbying influential people. They had a network throughout Britain that would be used to support the anti-slavery campaign. By late 1787, the Society had contacts in over 30 towns around the country.

A few years later every major town and city in Britain had an abolition committee.



Copper print engravers at work, Thomas Rowlandson, 1785. © British Museum.

A
LETTER
TO
WM. WILBERFORCE, Esq. M. P.
AND
THOSE WHO ACTED WITH HIM
MOST ZEALOUSLY
FOR THE
ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE.
Written in 1803.
London:
Printed and sold by W. Phillips,
George Yard, Lombard Street.
1803.

N. 3
NOTES
ON THE
TWO REPORTS
FROM THE
COMMITTEE
OF THE HONOURABLE
House of Assembly of Jamaica,
APPOINTED
To examine into, and to report to the House, the Allegations and Charges contained in the several Petitions which have been presented to the BRITISH HOUSE OF COMMONS, on the Subject of the SLAVE TRADE, and the Treatment of the NEGROES, &c. &c. &c.
BY A
JAMAICA PLANTER.
LONDON:
Printed and sold by James Phillips, George Yard, Lombard-Street.
M.DCC.LXXXIX.

THE
SPEECH
OF
Mr. BEAUFORT,
TUESDAY, THE 18th JUNE, 1788,
IN A
COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE HOUSE,
ON A
BILL
FOR REGULATING THE
CONVEYANCE OF NEGROES
FROM
Africa to the West-Indies.
TO WHICH ARE ADDED
OBSERVATIONS
ON THE
EVIDENCE
ADDUCED AGAINST THE
BILL.
LONDON:
Printed by J. Phillips, George-Yard, Lombard-Street.
M.DCC.LXXXIX.

A
ABSTRACT
OF THE
EVIDENCE,
DELIVERED BEFORE A
SELECT COMMITTEE
OF THE
HOUSE OF COMMONS
IN THE YEARS 1790, AND 1791;
ON THE PART OF THE
PETITIONERS
FOR THE
ABOLITION
OF THE
SLAVE-TRADE.
LONDON:
Printed by James Phillips, George Yard,
Lombard Street.
M.DCCXCII.

SOME
HISTORICAL ACCOUNT
OF
GUINEA,
Its Situation, Produce and the general Disposition of its INHABITANTS.
WITH
An inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the SLAVE-TRADE, its Nature and lamentable Effects.
ALSO
A Re-publication of the Sentiments of several Authors of Note, on this interesting Subject; particularly an Extract of a Treatise, by GRANVILLE SHARP.
By ANTHONY BENEZET.
Acts xvii. 24, 26. *God that made the World—hath made of one Blood all Nations of Men, for to dwell on all the Face of the Earth, and hath determined the—Bounds of their Habitation.*
Eccles. viii. 11. *Because Sentence against an evil Work is not executed speedily, therefore the Heart of the Sons of Men is fully set in them to do Evil.*
Deut. xxxii. 34. *Is not this laid up in Store with me and sealed up among my Treasure. To me belongeth Vengeance and Recompence, their Foot shall slide in due Time, for the Day of their Calamity is at Hand; and the Things that shall come upon them make haste.*
PHILADELPHIA: Printed by JOSEPH CRUNKSHANK, in Third-Street, opposite the Work-house.
M, DCC, LXXI.

Thomas Clarkson.

'A moral steam engine...'

Samuel Taylor Coleridge.



Thomas Clarkson depicted with his box of African products which he carried with him around Britain to show that there could be trades with Africa other than slaves.

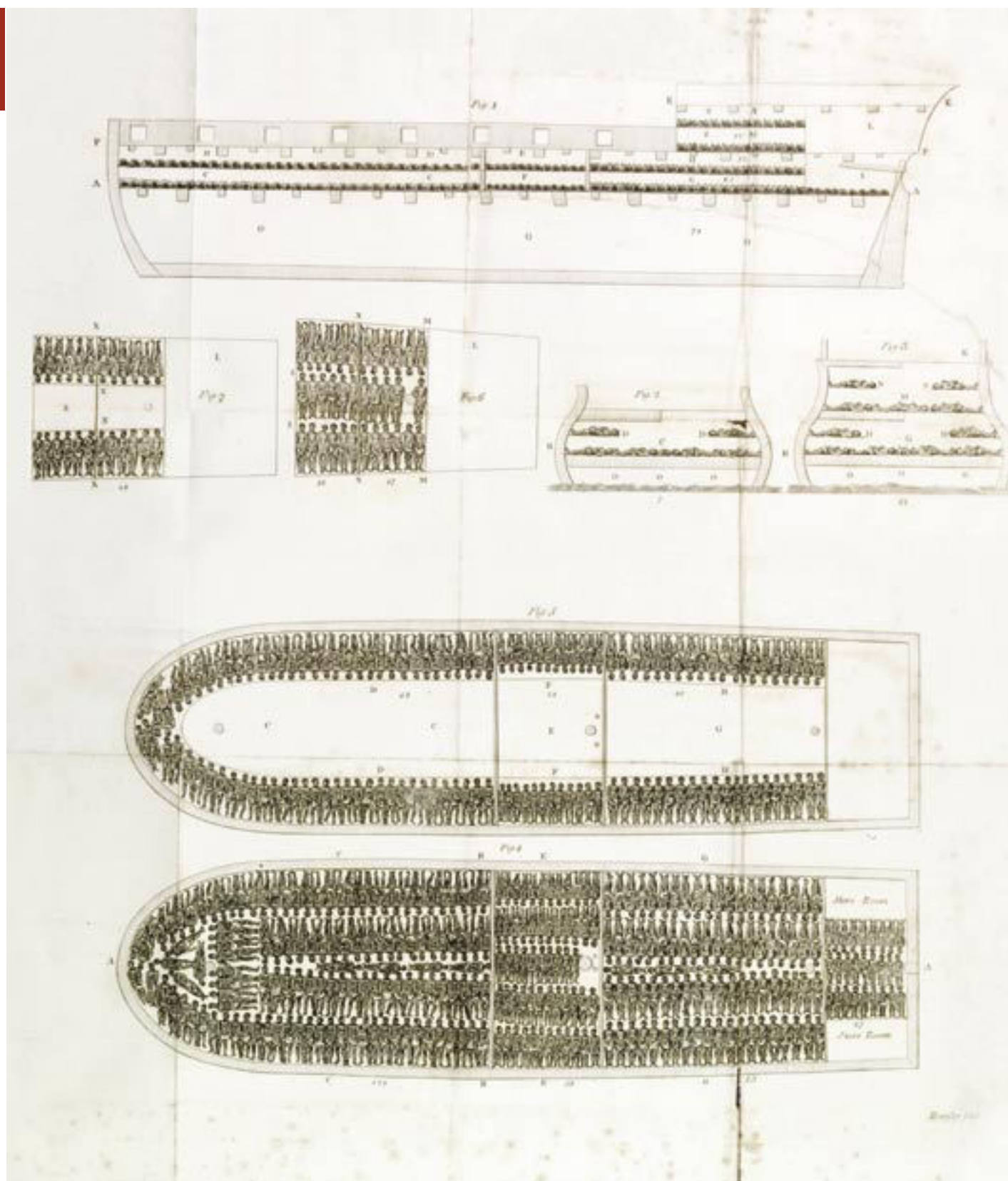
© Wilberforce House Museum, Hull.

The Reverend Thomas Clarkson was central to the abolition campaign. He was a founder member of the campaign committee, and dedicated almost his entire adult life to campaigning against slavery and the slave trade. He travelled the country, night and day on horseback, covering thousands of miles, gathering evidence against the slave trade, and organising petitions. He wrote countless letters and pamphlets, at times working through the night by candlelight. His energy and devotion to the cause were unstoppable.

He was admired and respected by his like-minded contemporaries, abused and threatened by his enemies. He died aged 86, in 1846, campaigning to the last by objecting to imports of slave-grown cotton and sugar.

'Some person should see these calamities to their end'

Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846).



The Brookes

The image of the Liverpool slave ship, the Brookes, was first published by the Plymouth Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in January 1789. The London committee had it carefully redrawn to ensure accuracy. It shows 482 slaves packed into the ship, although on some voyages the Brookes actually carried as many as 740 captives.

Over 7000 were printed as posters and appeared in homes and inns throughout the country. The image is shocking and immediately effective in conveying the inhumanity of slavery. It had a huge impact in the 18th century, when images of any sort were much less common than they are today.

Stowage of the British Slave Ship 'Brookes' under the Regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788.

© Images of Empire, Bristol.

New voices heard.

Many public debates were held on the subject of slavery. For the first time British audiences were addressed by women and by African speakers. Both Cugoano and Equiano travelled the country speaking out in public against the slave trade.

Their shocking first-hand accounts of the brutality of slavery rallied many people to the cause.

The eloquence of these African speakers challenged the racist assumption of the time that Africans were somehow less than human.



'The Gradual Abolition of the Slave Trade, or leaving of Sugar by Degrees'. Isaac Cruikshank, 1792.
© Images of Empire, Bristol.

An organisation called 'The Sons of Africa' was also active in the campaign. They published letters in newspapers and supported abolitionist meetings.

The anti-slavery cause was one that appealed especially to women; they were shocked by the cruelty of a trade that tore families apart. Many of the women who became involved in the campaign were Quakers or Evangelicals, and were usually middle-class. Besides public speaking and writing, women were active behind the scenes in persuading others to boycott slave-grown sugar. After 1807, when the abolition of the trade was achieved, women kept the issue of slavery in the public eye. For these women, abolition of the trade was not enough, slavery itself had to be abolished.

'We are clearly of the opinion that the nature of the slave trade needs only to be known to be detested.'

Granville Sharp.



Slave Trade Meeting Poster, 1814.
© Cheshire & Chester Archives & Local Studies.

POETRY



Hannah More (1745-1833)

Bristol-born Hannah More was an Evangelical and active campaigner against the slave trade. In 1788 she published *Slavery, a Poem*, an important poem of the abolition period. Throughout the 1790s she wrote a number of religious tracts; several of the Tracts opposed slavery and the slave trade, in particular, the poem *The Sorrows of Yamba; or, The Negro Woman's Lamentation*, which appeared in November 1795.

© Bristol's Museums, Galleries & Archives.



Ann Yearsley (1756-1806)

Ann Yearsley was known as 'Lactilla' or 'the Poetical Milkwoman of Bristol'. At one time she was a milk seller, then later married a farmer and had six children. She had been taught to read and write by her family, and despite a hard working life was able to turn her hand to writing poetry. In 1788 she produced her celebrated poem, *On the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade*. She also published two volumes of poetry, a play and a novel.

Ann Yearsley by Joseph Grozer, 1787.
© National Portrait Gallery.



Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

Coleridge spoke out against the slave trade, but did not produce a major anti-slavery poem. He lectured against the slave trade in Bristol in 1795, and worked up a version of his lecture for his publication *The Watchman* a year later. Lines denouncing the slave trade appear in *'Ode on the Departing Year'* (1796), *'France: an Ode'* (in its early versions) and *'Fears in Solitude'* (both 1798).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge by Peter Vandyke, c.1795.
© National Portrait Gallery.

Art and anti-slavery.

Paintings expressing anti-slavery sentiments were exhibited at the Royal Academy. Engravings were published in expensive books, but could also be viewed for free in the windows of printshops.



Slave Trade by George Morland

George Morland was a British painter of landscapes and sentimental rustic scenes. His work was very popular and he was well-known by the time he painted *Slave Trade* in 1789. The painting shows an African family being separated by the slave trade. Like the abolitionist poets, Morland's condemnation of the slave trade was expressed in emotional and sentimental topics.

Slave Trade by George Morland.
© Michael Graham-Stewart / The Bridgeman Art Library.

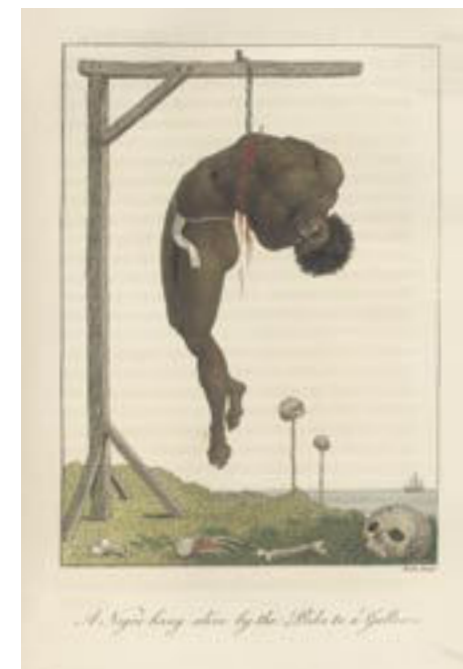
A Negro hung alive by the Ribs to a Gallows by William Blake

Hand-coloured engraving, by William Blake after John Gabriel Stedman. From *'Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of South America, from the year 1772 to 1777'* by John Gabriel Stedman.

John Gabriel Stedman was hired to help quell slave uprisings in the Dutch colony of Surinam in South America. This print is an illustration from the account of his time in Surinam, in which he describes the torture of recaptured slaves.

The engraving was made by the famous poet and artist, William Blake. Blake was a social and political radical who believed in equality and liberty for all. His engravings in Stedman's book highlight the injustice and brutality of slavery. This graphic depiction of a slave hanging by a single rib while still alive illustrates the extreme cruelty of Europeans in dealing with enslaved Africans in the Americas. It is deliberately shocking and repulsive, and became one of the most widely reproduced anti-slavery images.

A Negro hung alive by the Ribs to a Gallows, 1796.
© The British Library.



'...violent outcries against the slave-trade by pious divines, tender-hearted poetesses, and short-sighted politicians'

Proslavery writer, 1789.

Poetry was very popular in the 18th century. Many poems were written supporting the abolitionist cause; they appeared in newspapers, as books and were sold cheaply as individual sheets. Some poems were set to music and became popular songs, others were issued at social gatherings to prompt discussion about the trade.

William Cowper (1731-1800)

William Cowper was one of the most popular poets of his day. He was asked by the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade to write ballads that could be set to music and sung in the streets. Cowper published the lines 'Pity for Poor Africans' in the *Northampton Mercury* in 1788. Other anti-slavery poems included *Charity* (1782), *The Task* (1784), *The Negro's Complaint* (1788), *The Morning Dream* (1788), and *Sweet Meat Has Sour Sauce* or *The Slave Trader in the Dumps* (1788).

William Cowper by George Romney, 1792.
© National Portrait Gallery.



PETITIONS AND PARLIAMENT

Hundreds of petitions signed by people from all walks of life were sent into Parliament in support of abolition.

102 petitions against the slave trade were submitted to Parliament in 1788, rising to 519 in 1792 – the greatest number ever submitted on one particular subject, totalling over 400,000 names. It is estimated that 13% of the adult male population signed an abolitionist petition in the period 1787-92.

Submitting petitions was a traditional way of political campaigning. Many people did not have the vote, so this was their only means of expressing their opinion to Parliament. What was remarkable about the abolitionist petitions was that they expressed a grievance on behalf of other people. This lack of self-interest was baffling to some commentators. At the time the abolition of the trade was seen as totally contrary to Britain's commercial interests. The petitions, both for and against abolition, express perfectly the conflict between economic self-interest of the slave trade and the moral cause of the abolitionists.

Petitions for abolition.

A Petition of the People called Quakers, was also presented to the House, and read;

Representing the present state of the African Slave Trade, as being totally repugnant to the Principles of Justice, the Common Rights of Men, and the Dictates of the Christian Religion, in the Conduct whereof the Lives and Happiness of unoffending Millions have been sacrificed to Avarice and Cruelty; and requesting the attention of the House to so enormous an Evil, and the effectual suppression of the said Trade.

8 February 1788

Of the Citizens of Bristol, in Guildhall assembled (Broad St)

Representing the present state of the African Slave Trade, as being contrary to the Principles of Justice, Humanity, good Policy, and Religion; and submitting the same to the Consideration of the House.

20 February 1788

Petitions against abolition.

A Petition of the Mayor, Burgesses, and Commonalty, of the City of Bristol, in Common Council assembled, under their Common Seal...

'As Guardians of the general Interests of the Citizens of Bristol, the Petitioners consider it their indispensable Duty to represent to the House, that the West India Commerce, with its concomitant and dependent manufactures, form by far the most important Branches of the Trade, and from which the greatest Part of the Opulence of the said City of Bristol has been derived.'

12 May 1789

Of Master, &c. of Merchant Venturers of Bristol
Of African Merchants of Bristol
Of West India Planters of Bristol
Of Principal Manufacturers and Ship Builders
Of Merchants and Traders of Bristol to Newfoundland, to the like Effect; referred to the Committee of the whole House on the Circumstances of the Slave Trade.

Parliamentary proceedings.

'Africa, Africa your sufferings have been the theme that has arrested and engages my heart. Your sufferings no tongue can express, no language impart.'

William Wilberforce - House of Commons 1792.

In 1788 Parliament had passed a Bill introduced by Sir William Dolben which aimed to improve conditions for African captives on board ships. This measure was strongly resisted by the pro-slavery lobby.

The pro-slavery, or West Indian, interest in Parliament was very strong. MPs who opposed abolition included those whose constituencies had an economic interest in the trade – London, Liverpool, Bristol and Lancashire amongst others. Supporters of slavery included many establishment figures such as members of the Royal Family, admirals in the navy, and financiers.

Any attempt to introduce abolition or measures to improve the conditions for captive Africans were strongly resisted.



William Wilberforce
[1779-1833]

William Wilberforce was the son of a wealthy Hull merchant. In 1780 he became MP for Hull, later representing Yorkshire. Thomas Clarkson persuaded Wilberforce to lobby for the abolition of the slave trade. For 18 years Wilberforce repeatedly introduced a Bill to abolish the slave trade, until it was finally passed in 1807.

William Wilberforce, c. 1790.
© Anti-Slavery International / Images of Empire, Bristol.



Colonel Banastre Tarleton
[1754-1833]

Colonel Banastre Tarleton was MP for Liverpool from 1790 to 1812. He was the outspoken leader of the pro-slavery supporters in the House of Commons.

Colonel Tarleton, Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1782.
© The National Gallery.

‘A WHOLE NATION CRYING WITH ONE VOICE.’

William Wordsworth, 1792.

Towards 1807

'The African Slave Trade... is hereby abolished, prohibited, and declared to be unlawful.'

An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1807.

Despite the eloquence and persistence of William Wilberforce, every bill opposing the slave trade introduced from 1789 was defeated. The war with France, which broke out in 1793, was a further setback for the abolitionist cause. To threaten Britain's commercial interest in wartime seemed unpatriotic.

By 1806 the political and military climate was more promising. Opponents of abolition did not want foreign competitors to supply their plantations with slaves if Britain could not. Following the battle of Trafalgar in 1805, Britain's naval supremacy meant that she could seize the ships of most of her competitors.

A Foreign Slave Trade Act was passed to prevent British traders from supplying foreign colonies.

This prompted abolitionists to renew the campaign, and the petitioning movement was revived. The leading ministers of the new government formed in 1806 supported abolition, and even Liverpool had returned an abolitionist MP. In 1807 the abolitionist cause finally triumphed. A bill making the slave trade illegal passed the House of Commons by a huge majority of 283 to 16. It comfortably passed the House of Lords and became law 25 March 1807.



The House of Commons in the first decade of the 19th century.
© Mary Evans Picture Library.

The road to emancipation

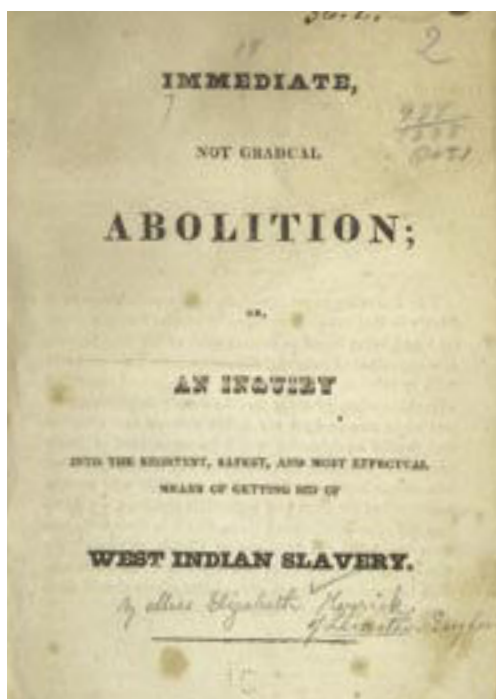
The abolition of the trade in enslaved Africans did not free people who were already enslaved. For those living in slavery in the Caribbean and elsewhere life continued much as before.

**WE MUST NOT TALK OF GRADUALLY
ABOLISHING MURDER,
LICENTIOUSNESS,
CRUELTY, TYRANNY...**

Mrs Grundy, a Wiltshire campaigner, 1820s.

In Britain the abolition campaigners were divided: some thought that slavery would die out, others merely wanted the conditions of slavery to be improved. A campaign was finally started; in 1823 the London Society for Mitigating and Gradually Abolishing the State of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions was established. Thomas Clarkson was again active in this campaign, travelling the country mobilising support. The sugar boycott was revived, and petitions were once more sent into Parliament.

Political events also paved the way for emancipation; following the 1832 Reform Act many plantation owning MPs lost their seats, and Parliament became more sympathetic to abolition.



1824 pamphlet by Elizabeth Heyrick 'Immediate, not Gradual Abolition'.

Women were particularly active; many women's societies for emancipation were set up, and Elizabeth Heyrick was vocal in demanding immediate emancipation of enslaved people. The formal committee favoured a more gradual approach.

1808 election at Wootton Bassett, Wiltshire.

There was popular support for the abolition of slavery. The 1832 Reform Act allowed more men to vote, so MPs had to take note of public feeling on the issue.



Slavery abolished.

**WE WOULD RATHER
DIE ON YONDER
GALLOWS THAN
LIVE IN SLAVERY.**

Sam Sharpe, resistance leader, 1831.

**African slaves in the Caribbean
took action that would be critical
in achieving emancipation.**

Rebellions broke out in Barbados in 1816, Guyana in 1823 and Jamaica in 1831. These determined acts of resistance, although unsuccessful and repressed with great barbarity, frightened the British government. Were they in danger of losing their Caribbean colonies, as the French had with Haiti? The British people meanwhile, were sickened by the brutality and violence that was necessary to deny people their freedom.

In 1833 an Act was passed which would abolish slavery throughout the British colonies on 1 August 1834. The slave holders were compensated for their 'loss of property' – they received £20 million of public money. The slaves themselves had to work as 'apprentices' without pay for another six years. They resisted this unjust scheme, and there were protests in Britain as well. Caribbean apprenticeship was ended on 1 August 1838. The former slaves did not receive a penny of compensation.



The Emancipation plaque in the Falmouth Baptist Church, Jamaica, erected by the 'Sons of Africa'. It commemorates the emancipation of British slaves in 1838.

Photograph by Jean Besson. ©Jean Besson.