

# **THE ABOLITION DEBATE IN THE HAMPSHIRE TELEGRAPH AND THE HAMPSHIRE CHRONICLE**

Local newspapers provided a platform for views both for and against the abolition of the slave trade, in the years before the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, and in the period from 1807 to the abolition of slavery in British colonies in 1833. The *Hampshire Chronicle*, the first Hampshire-based newspaper, was established in 1772, only fifteen years before the campaign against the slave trade began to gather momentum, so this was one of the first campaigns which could take advantage of the opportunity presented by local newspapers for dissemination of ideas – just one of the ways in which the abolition campaign blazed a trail for other campaigns of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1792, more than five hundred petitions against the slave trade were submitted to Parliament, around five times as many as in the previous wave of petitioning, in 1788. It has been estimated that around 400,000 people may have signed (this would represent around 13% of the adult male population, although in some cases women and juveniles also signed).<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> J R Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807* (Manchester University Press, 1995; reprinted by Frank Cass Publishers, 1998), p114.

One might hope to find reports in the *Chronicle* of the public meetings and committee proceedings which presumably lay behind the submission of petitions from Alton, Basingstoke, Ringwood, Fordingbridge, Whitchurch, and Portsmouth and Gosport. However, the collection of news from around the county appears to have been in its infancy, and many of the references to petitioning are contained in paragraphs which appear to have been reprinted from the London Gazette or other newspapers, and relate to counties other than Hampshire.

There are several references to the boycott of sugar, especially sugar believed to have been produced on slave-worked plantations: in January 1792 a report suggested that the inhabitants of Leicester and the surrounding area had almost all given up sugar and rum, and in February a report appeared about the disuse of sugar in Frome.

Some of the reports present the abolition campaign in a favourable light: for instance, a report in March of Henley's intended petition is accompanied by the wish that every town would exert itself similarly. The scale of the campaign was indicated by, for instance, a report in April that two hours had been spent in the Commons one day, receiving petitions.

The other side of the debate was also given column space: in April 1792 a letter was printed purporting to come from a child under six, suggesting a sense of disillusion with his pledge to abstain from sugar, after hearing suggestions that the slaves enjoyed better working conditions than his father's workers in Britain.

Later in the same month there was a reference, apparently in a paragraph reprinted from a London paper, to William Wilberforce's alleged 'quixotic philanthropy [sic]', describing him as 'leader of the anti-sugar sectaries – a sweetening gratification to the pride of his misconceived and misguided humanity.'

One way in which the campaigners could be sure of publicising their petitions was to pay for an advertisement; this was the approach adopted by the Portsmouth and Gosport organisers, as shown elsewhere in this exhibition. As the text of petitions was not recorded in the *Commons Journals*, and the original petitions have not survived, such advertisements may provide the only record of the wording of a petition, indicating the multiple grounds on which the abolitionists urged their case – the trade was incompatible with Christianity, inconsistent with the ideals of a liberal nation, hindered other trade with African peoples, and led to the death of many British sailors.

At this time the *Chronicle* cost 3d a copy; this price would have been out of the reach of a large proportion of the local population, many of whom would not, in any case, have been able to read it, but it is likely that the newspaper reached a readership much larger than the number of copies sold. Probably many who could not afford to buy it had copies passed on to them or read aloud to them.

From 1799 Hampshire people had another newspaper available to them, the *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle or Portsmouth and Chichester Advertiser*, a weekly paper costing 6d. Although most closely associated with Portsmouth and south-east Hampshire, it also included reports from Winchester and other towns. In common with the *Chronicle*, it included a significant proportion of national news, as many of its readers would not have been able to afford a daily newspaper.

News of the Parliamentary debates of 1806-7 was brought to a Hampshire audience through the reports from the *London Gazette* reprinted in both the *Telegraph* and the *Chronicle*. Other news related to the abolition campaign also appeared in the *Telegraph* around this time, but most of it was, once again, reprinted from the *London Gazette* rather than directly representing local activities or opinions.

One of the more, apparently, sympathetic examples in the *Telegraph*, published in November 1806, begins “The friends of the oppressed African race will be pleased to learn that, during the course of the Elections in various parts of the kingdom, the popular sentiment has been very strongly expressed against the continuance of that traffic of human flesh, which, to the disgrace of this enlightened country, is still permitted, if not encouraged, by our laws.”

The article then gives the example of a Yorkshire candidate who was proud of being an independent, having given no pledges that would tie him to any party, except “that of using my endeavours to tear from our statute-books, that bloody page, which authorises us to trample on the first rights of our fellow creatures, and to deal in human flesh.”

The *Telegraph's* reports of Parliamentary proceedings in 1807 show that not everyone was prepared to stop at the mere abolition of the transatlantic trade: others wished to press on immediately towards the emancipation of the slaves already in the West Indies. The issue of 23 March 1807 contains a report of Lord Percy's speech introducing his bill to declare free-born all children born to 'negro parents, slaves in the West India colonies of Great Britain'. Even Wilberforce felt obliged to advise deferring consideration of this question.

The following week's edition of the *Telegraph* describes in some detail the later stages of debate on the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. Less than a month later, on 20 April 1807, it carried a report of the first meeting of the new Society aimed at 'bestowing every blessing of civilised society' on Africa.

When the campaign for the actual emancipation of slaves in British colonies gathered pace again in the 1820s and early 1830s, the local newspapers reflected (and, no doubt, stimulated) local debate on the subject. In April 1832 the *Telegraph* printed a report of an anti-slavery meeting at Fareham:

"The objectors to Slavery, resident at Fareham, had a Meeting yesterday se'nnight [a week ago yesterday], at the Red Lion, and drew up a petition to each house of Parliament, expressive of a hope that measures would be taken for the immediate abolition of slavery throughout the British dominions..."

The *Telegraph*, however, urged caution, commenting:

"...but how indemnification is to be given to the slave owner, or who are to provide and insure the good management and subsistence of the Blacks when released from their masters, the Fareham abolitionists have not pointed out."

Similar caution was expressed in the *Telegraph* in July 1832, with the comment:

“We should rejoice in common with all thinking men, at the Abolition of Slavery, but great caution should be taken that this be not too hastily effected. Unutterable ruin would be the fate of England, if the traffic with the West Indies were suddenly interrupted ; our Cotton Manufactories would stop for want of raw cotton, the Interest of our National Debt would be unpaid for want of the Duties on Sugar, Rum, and Coffee, our ships would rot, and our seamen be beggars for want of employ... Electors should consider this, and not demand pledges of Candidates which would ensure this destruction” – a sign that the electorate, newly enlarged under the 1832 Reform Act, saw this as one of the key issues of the time.

One of the most detailed reports in the *Telegraph* on this question appeared in January 1833, and concerned a meeting held in Portsea, called by the Mayor of Portsmouth in response to a request signed by over one hundred people, to consider petitioning both houses of Parliament for the abolition of slavery. A resolution describing ‘the slavery now existing in the British Colonies’ as ‘impolitic, unconstitutional, and unchristian ; a disgrace to a land which vaunts its love of liberty ; a curse on the society in which it prevails ; and an evil which ought to be abolished without delay’ was passed with only one vote against.

After the passing of the 1833 act, local societies continued to organise lectures aimed at drawing attention to the continuing existence of slavery in parts of the world outside British control, especially the United States.

For instance the *Telegraph* printed reports of lectures by escaped slaves in Southampton in July 1839, and Newport in August 1857. In October 1862 there was a report of a lecture at Ryde by Revd W W Mitchell, 'a coloured gentleman', and there were also reports of anti-slavery meetings at Portsmouth in January 1838, at Newport in September 1841, and at Southampton in September 1843.

Meetings in Winchester and Portsmouth known to have been specifically concerned with slavery in the United States were reported in the *Telegraph* in February 1847 and October 1863 respectively. Similarly, the *Chronicle* included reports of lectures by former slaves in various Hampshire towns including Andover and Southampton.

The examples given here from the *Chronicle* and the *Telegraph* are by no means comprehensive: further research would no doubt bring to life more local news and comment; please see the free leaflet for details of how to find locally-held copies of these and other titles.



*Hampshire Chronicle*, 30 April 1792

Previous page: *Hampshire Chronicle*, 9 April 1792

*Hampshire Telegraph*, November 1806

*Hampshire Telegraph*, 23 March 1807

*Hampshire Telegraph*, 30 March 1807

*Hampshire Telegraph*, 20 April 1807

*Hampshire Telegraph*, 23 April 1832

*Hampshire Telegraph*, 9 July 1832

*Hampshire Telegraph*, 28 January 1833