

# ABOLITION

## SECTION THREE: PITT, WILBERFORCE AND THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE



*William Wilberforce, aged 29 (Wilberforce House Museum, Hull City)*



*Wilberforce House, Hull (2006)*

William Pitt and William Wilberforce were both born in 1759: Pitt at Hayes Place, Hayes and Wilberforce in Hull, Yorkshire.

Pitt was born into a political family. Three generations had been MPs and his father was soon to become Prime Minister.

Wilberforce's family made their money importing timber and iron from the Baltic, so he knew the importance of trade. Hull was the fourth largest port in England but being on the east coast its markets were mainly European. It was a very different place from Bromley, except in one way: its wealth was not dependent on the slave trade.

When he was ten Wilberforce's father died and he went to stay with his aunt in Wimbledon, then a country village. His aunt was an evangelical and the young Wilberforce discovered a whole new approach to religion. While there he met John Newton, the former slave trader turned preacher and an early campaigner against the trade from which he had once made his money.

When his mother discovered his new found evangelism she was horrified and Wilberforce was ordered back to Hull. Now 12, he was sent to Pocklington Grammar School where he was exposed to more traditional influences. While he was there, it is claimed, he wrote a letter to a newspaper in York condemning the slave trade, the first step on his lifelong campaign.



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In 1776 Wilberforce went to St. John's College, Cambridge, already wealthy through inheritance.

Pitt also attended Cambridge and it was here they met. By 1779 they were friends. The issue of slavery was becoming important to them. In 1780 they both became MPs.

In these years Wilberforce lived an extravagant life, drinking heavily and gambling hard, but his life seemed to lack purpose and he became more drawn to the evangelical influences of his childhood. In 1785, following a period of depression, he announced his conversion to Evangelical Christianity.

Pitt was not pleased at this development, especially as his friend indicated he intended to withdraw from public life. Pitt and others tried to persuade Wilberforce that he could do more by staying in Parliament and fighting for the causes he believed in.

This led to the famous conversation in May 1787 under an oak tree in the grounds of Pitt's home, Holwood House, Keston, that set in motion events that would change the world.



*Holwood House (c. 1795) (L10/1)*



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The meeting is considered by many to be the start of real progress along the road to abolition and eventually emancipation. The tree was later named the Wilberforce Oak and became a place of pilgrimage for Christians, reformers and historians.



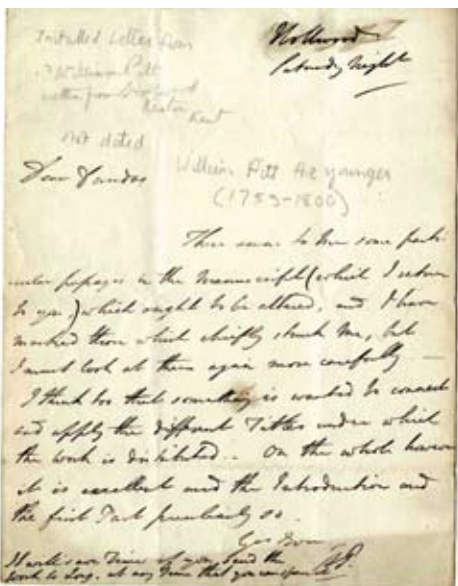
The Wilberforce Oak, Keston c.1830



The Wilberforce Oak, 1873, on the occasion of a visit from prominent members of the Anglican Church in Africa including Bishop Samuel Crowther (c1807-1891) – fourth from the left, a former slave and the first Black Anglican Bishop. (K11/30)

Pitt was Prime Minister from 1785 until 1801 and again from 1804 until his death in 1806. As such he had enormous political influence nationally and locally. He lived at Holwood for 18 years acting as a magnet for other

politicians who wanted to keep in touch. Bromley was not a radical place but equally, as its wealth did not depend on the slave trade, locals with influence began gradually to join with Pitt and Wilberforce in opposing the trade.



A letter from Pitt to Henry Dundas concerning the abolition of the slave trade. (Bromley Archives ref. 1754)

Wilberforce was an important figure in bringing together the leading figures in the abolitionist movement. He was financially independent, he was a respected figure in Parliament and he was



William Pitt, from a portrait by Thomas Gainsborough (Private Collection courtesy of Historical Portraits Ltd.)

a good friend of the Prime Minister. Abolitionists knew that with his support and friendship their chances of success were greatly enhanced. Among others, he communicated regularly with:

- Granville Sharp
- Thomas Clarkson
- John Newton
- Olaudah Equiano
- James Stephens



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In return for Wilberforce's support the abolitionists kept him fed with all the facts they could find to support his work in Parliament.



*Wilberforce in the last year of his life.*  
(National Portrait Gallery, London)

He campaigned on behalf of slaves from 1787, when he began his crusade, until his death in 1833. He continued to be a figure of inspiration until the end.

In May 1821, he asked Sir Thomas Buxton (d.1845) an MP and brewer to become his partner and, later, his successor, allowing his work to continue after his death. A Bill abolishing slavery was finally passed a few days before Wilberforce died. Although his role in the process may have been

exaggerated over the past 200 years, there is no doubt that his combination of zeal, articulate speaking, leadership and contacts among the social and political elite was pivotal in achieving the aims he and his fellow campaigners had worked so hard to bring about.



*Sir Thomas Buxton (c.1835)*  
(National Portrait Gallery, London)