

Project Aims

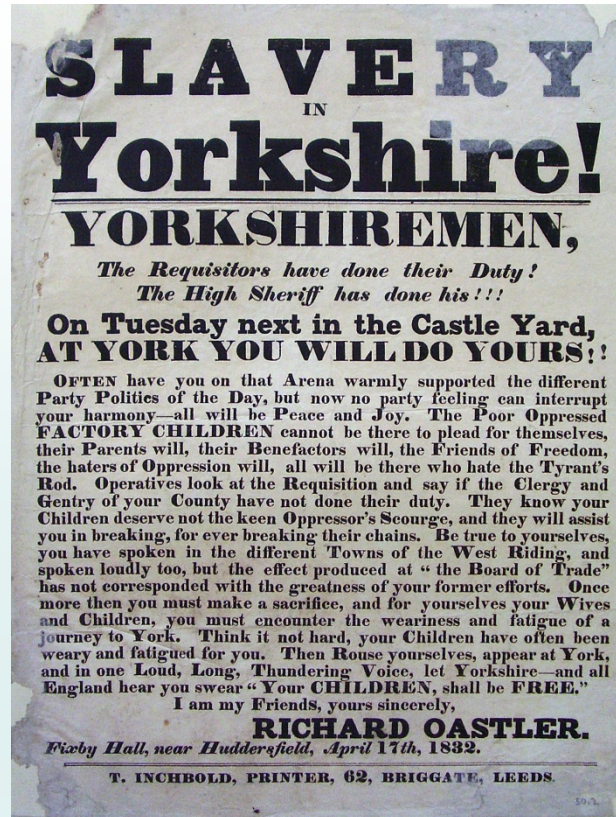
The University Archives, West Yorkshire Archives, Huddersfield Local history Library and Kirklees Museums and Galleries hold significant sources relating to the Huddersfield centered campaign against 'Yorkshire Slavery'.

This project aims to bring to as wide an audience as possible, knowledge about the area's heritage connections with 'Yorkshire Slavery' and the pioneering campaign for the reduction in children's working hours, led by Richard Oastler.

This will be achieved by the following means:

- Workshops for school children, sixth formers, local societies and youth theatres.
- An exhibition about 'Yorkshire Slavery'.
- A Heritage Trail (virtual and leaflet) of sites associated with the campaign.
- The development of a website dedicated to Yorkshire Slavery
- The compilation of educational packages linked to the national curriculum, recently revised to accommodate information on the slave trade

Should you require any further details about this project and events that are to be held in relation to it, our contact details are provided overleaf.



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'Yorkshire Slavery'

The Campaign for the Release of the Oppressed



'Yorkshire Slavery' - The Campaign for the Release of the Oppressed



The University of Huddersfield in partnership with the Heritage Lottery Fund and the West Yorkshire Archives Service are inviting people to participate in commemorating the bicentennial anniversary of the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

As part of the anniversary, the University of Huddersfield is looking to promote the role of the Tory Radical Richard Oastler, who during the 1830s up until his death in 1861, was a leading figure in the campaign for the abolition of Child Slavery in the factories and mills across the region.

Who was Richard Oastler?

Richard Oastler was born on 20 December 1789, in St Peter's Square, Leeds. He was the youngest of eight children. At the age of eight, he attended Fulneck Moravian School, where he studied for eight years. His initial ambition was to go into the legal profession, but this was curtailed by the influence of his father. He later worked as a Commission Agent and became a respected merchant in Leeds. In 1820, he was declared bankrupt and after turning his back on the business world, he followed in his father's footsteps by becoming the steward of Thomas Thornhill's estate at Fixby Hall, Huddersfield, which was where the campaign to abolish Child Slavery in the factories and mills began.

'Slavery in Yorkshire'

In 1830, at a time when the anti-slavery movement protested about the conditions of West Indian workers in the sugar plantations, Richard Oastler was a key figure in shifting the debate towards the condition of workers in England.

Following a meeting with his friend and colleague John Wood, a factory owner in Bradford, Richard Oastler was told about the appalling conditions under which women, and in particularly children, were worked in the woollen and worsted mills. Wood told Oastler, who was deeply involved with William Wilberforce's anti-slavery campaign, that the cruelties and punishments inflicted upon children were as bad as those of the slaves on whose behalf he had successfully campaigned.

Appalled by what he had heard from his colleague John Wood, on 29 September 1830, Richard Oastler wrote a letter to the *Leeds Mercury*, titled 'Slavery in Yorkshire', which highlighted the plight of child workers in the factories and mills. His letter has been called 'a manifesto', which led to the agitation of the Ten Hours bill.

The Campaign for 'Ten Hours'

Richard Oastler's letter which highlighted the plight of child workers, caused widespread opposition from the owners of mills and factories. They saw his campaign as a threat to their profits and livelihoods. However, his letters also attracted the support of workers from other industries, in the form of Short-Time Committees, which led to the signing of the Fixby Hall Compact.

As the early 1830s progressed, leading political figures such as Michael Thomas Sadler and Sir John Cam Hobhouse became involved with Oastler's campaign. Following the failure of two pieces of legislation, a Factory Act finally became law in 1833. Although it did not achieve the desired 'ten hours' or a major limitation in the number of hours which children worked; it was a pyrrhic victory.

In 1836, Oastler encouraged workers to use strikes and sabotage in their campaign for factory legislation and changes in the Poor Law. When Thomas Thornhill heard about this, Oastler was sacked from his post as steward of Fixby. Thornhill began legal proceedings against Oastler for unpaid debts. Unable to pay back the money he owed, Oastler was jailed for debt in December 1840. His friends raised money to help him, but it was not until February 1844 that Oastler's debts were paid and he was subsequently released from the Fleet Prison. Upon his release, he continued his campaign for 'Ten Hours'.

The demand for 'Ten Hours' which Richard Oastler wanted, was not achieved until 1846, with the passing of a Factory Act which limited the hours of labour to sixty-three per week from the 1st of July 1847, and to fifty-eight per week, from the 1st of May 1848.

Richard Oastler died on 22 August 1861 in Harrogate, and was buried at St Stephen's Church, Kirkstall. Right up until the very end of his life he was regarded as both the 'Father of the Poor' and the 'Defender of the Oppressed'.