

Thomas Fowell Buxton and The Anti-Slavery Movement

This display commemorates the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act of 25 March 1807, which ended the legal carriage of enslaved Africans in British ships.

Portugal and Spain dominated the early transatlantic slave trade, carrying slaves across the Atlantic to their new colonies in the Americas. England joined in the trade in 1562 with three ships. The trade attained its highest levels in the 1780s, by which time it was dominated by Britain. It is estimated that 70,000 slaves were being carried across the Atlantic per year, half of them by the British.

These years also saw the rise of the first real impetus against the slave trade. In 1792, Parliament agreed that the slave trade should be 'gradually' abolished, without specifying a timetable. The same year a campaign for a national boycott of slave-made sugar was launched. Much has been rightly made of the role played by MP William Wilberforce in obtaining the abolition of the slave trade, but the efforts of slaves and former slaves must not be forgotten. Chief amongst these were Ignatius Sancho, Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) who campaigned in Norwich during 1794. Equiano's autobiography went through nine editions, the eighth being printed in Norwich.

Slave rebellions, whether ruthlessly quashed or successful (such as the 1791 uprising in French Saint-Domingue, modern-day Haiti), showed the danger of amassing large numbers of mistreated people.

Abolitionists saw the cessation of the slave trade as a way to force slave owners to improve the slaves' conditions and as a necessary first step towards the end of slavery. In 1807 the West Indies were in debt, there was a surplus of sugar and colonies did not require quite as many new slaves. Wilberforce used these economic reasons, as well as humanitarian ones, and finally convinced Parliament to vote for abolition.

In 1821 an ageing Wilberforce asked the young and energetic MP Thomas Fowell Buxton to carry on the anti-slavery struggle in Parliament. Having agreed, Buxton led a ten-year campaign of continuous agitation in Parliament until slavery itself was abolished in 1833.

Slavery today

Although slavery has been a part of human society since antiquity, the scale of the transatlantic slave trade was unprecedented. In his 1839 book *The Slave Trade*, Thomas Fowell Buxton estimated that Africa lost 475,000 people a year to slavery. After the slave trade was declared illegal in 1807, Britain used its position to lead a crusade against slave trafficking by other nations. Slavery was officially abolished in Britain in 1833 and gradually other countries followed suit.

Two hundred years after the abolition of the British slave trade the effects of slavery can still be felt. Racism has its antecedents in the dehumanising treatment of black people who were traded in their millions from Africa to America in appalling

conditions in British ships. Furthermore the lucrative activity of human trafficking is still prevalent. In 2005 the International Labour Organisation estimated that at least 12.3 million people around the world were bound by slavery. 2.4 million of them would have been trafficked. Child labourers in sweatshops, trafficked prostitutes, kidnapped child soldiers, forced domestic service and descent slavery are some of the faces of present-day slavery.

People are regularly trafficked into the United Kingdom and sold into prostitution or forced labour. Children are bought by people posing as their relatives in order to obtain benefits. Although figures are difficult to estimate, according to Government statistics, 4,000 women and children were trafficked into prostitution in the UK in 2003. East Anglia is thought to be one of the main destinations for forced labourers to pick fruit and vegetables.

The work of Equiano, Buxton, Wilberforce and thousands of others is as relevant today as in 1807.

For further information see:

www.unicef.org

www.slavebritain.org

www.antislavery.org

www.understandingslavery.com

www.eaves4women.co.uk/POPPY_Project/POPPY_Project.php