

Abolition

Britain was the world's biggest slave trading country in the late 18th century. But, around this time, a number of circumstances combined that eventually led to Britain abolishing, first, the slave trade (1807), and then slavery itself (1834).

Resistance by enslaved people was an important factor. Simultaneously, some people in Britain began to question the morality of the slave trade. These 'Abolitionists' employed new political campaigning methods to harness the support of unprecedented numbers of people. Vested interests made it a slow process and the resulting laws were far from perfect. But, for formerly enslaved people, it was a step towards achieving freedom.

At the beginning, the Abolitionists' task seemed impossible. But, through their efforts, Britain became one of the first European countries to abolish its slave trade

Before Abolition

There had always been objections to Britain's involvement in the slave trade. As early as 1640, the Reverend Morgan Godwyn published an anti-slavery tract and in 1735, John Atkins, a ship's surgeon, wrote about the appalling conditions of the Middle Passage. However, their opinions were largely ignored as slavery continued to underpin the wealth and prosperity of so many people.

Many British people were not familiar with the horrors of the slave system because most enslaved Africans were transported directly to the Caribbean. However, there was a small but active community of Black Britons. In 1750, there were about 20,000, living mainly in London. While some were brought here via the Americas to act as servants, most were just ordinary members of the community, carving out lives and opportunities for themselves in 18th century Britain. Some, like Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho, were active in highlighting the injustices of the slave trade and calling for it to be abolished.

Slowly, their voices were joined by those who wrote texts and pamphlets, and preached sermons against slavery. They succeeded in attracting public attention to the issue, which was further bolstered by news of rebellions in the Caribbean and new ideas circulating in continental Europe about rights, freedom and equality for all.

Some wanted to abolish slavery completely; others just the slave trade. Still others wanted to regulate the trade, forcing ships' captains and plantations owners to improve facilities and conditions. The debate had begun.

The Abolition campaign takes off

On 22nd May 1787, the first meeting of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade took place in London. Its first aim was to persuade Parliament to ban the slave trade. While many early members were Quakers, the Society was soon enrolling people of all religious persuasion and social background.

By late 1787, the Society had contacts in over 30 towns around the country. The Abolitionists succeeded in mobilising public opinion on a scale never seen before in Britain – people signed petitions, attended lectures, abstained from eating West Indian sugar and even wore jewellery that advertised their support for Abolition.

One of the icons of the campaign was the image of a kneeling slave produced by Josiah Wedgwood. Relatively inexpensive to produce, it made the campaign accessible and fashionable. Benjamin Franklin said that its 'impact was equal to that of the best written Pamphlets'. But, the image also summed up British attitudes to Abolition – Africa was depicted as a helpless and grateful brother, requiring European assistance.

The Abolitionists believed in education and debate to achieve their aims. They argued that ending the slave trade would save the lives of thousands of European sailors, open new markets for British goods, and encourage cheap production of the raw materials needed by industry.

Despite overwhelming popular support, war in Europe and the Government's nervousness of mass political agitation prevented the Abolitionists from succeeding in the 1790s – they would have to wait for the new century.

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14.8.2006

Parliamentary Proceedings

Despite mass public support for Abolition, in order to become law it had to be approved by Parliament. This required a Member of Parliament to submit a Bill which would be debated and then voted upon by the House of Commons. If this passed, the House of Lords would vote on it. Only if they passed the Bill, would the King sign it into law, creating an Act of Parliament.

The pro-slavery, or West Indian, interest in Parliament was very strong and used all sorts of arguments to ensure that Abolition would never succeed. They pointed out how important the Caribbean plantations were to the imperial economy – in the early 19th century, they provided nearly 20% of Britain's imports. The Abolitionists in Parliament, led by William Wilberforce, responded with arguments of their own and so the debate raged back and forth, as Bill after Bill was defeated.

It was only in 1807 that Britain finally abolished the slave trade. On 23rd February, the House of Commons voted, by 283 votes to 16, in favour of a Bill proposed by Lord Howick and Sir Samuel Romilly that would abolish Britain's slave trade. After passing the House of Lords, it gained Royal Assent on 25th March and passed into law. The Act (47 Geo. III, c. 36), stated that from 1st May 1807 all slave trading by British subjects, was 'utterly abolished, prohibited and declared to be unlawful'.

Abolition and After – West Africa and the Royal Navy

Despite the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, slavery itself went on as before. However, anti-slavery sentiment in Britain continued to grow.

Off the coast of Africa, the Royal Navy policed the ban. While over 1000 slave ships were captured by the 'West Africa Squadron', only a limited stretch of coastline could be patrolled effectively, leaving thousands of miles open to other slave traders.

At home, campaigners used well-tested tactics to agitate for further reform. In 1814, 700,000 people signed petitions demanding an end to all European slave-trading activities. Anti-slavery magazines highlighted the role of missionaries, sailors and others in eradicating the slave trade and pointing out what remained to be done. Anti-slavery goods were familiar sights throughout the period.

The campaigners believed that Parliament was a 'steam engine which required only the steam of public opinion, strongly expressed, to enable it to annihilate Colonial Slavery at one majestic stroke'.

The campaign finally succeeded in 1834 when slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire, although it was followed by four years of 'apprenticeship' that continued to restrict personal freedom.

Britain's anti-slavery legislation cost 1.8% of its annual national income over fifty years – many times more than most wealthy countries give in overseas aid today. However, the main beneficiaries were plantation owners, who were compensated to the tune of £20 million – equivalent to 40% of the annual national budget then.

Nevertheless, the worldwide anti-slavery struggle became a key part of British imperial policy in the 19th century.

Image.

The Fabrication of Palm Oil at Whydah (see Spreadsheet)

Abolition and After – East Africa

Part of Britain's self-appointed anti-slavery role involved the ending of slavery in Africa and especially the East African trade.

This was a flourishing trade with about 20,000 people being transported per annum from Zanzibar alone. Like the transatlantic slave trade, many more perished on the way to the coast and on the journeys to their destinations – the Arabian peninsula, and other areas in the Gulf of Persia.

Anti-slavery action was now seen as a defining feature of Britain's imperial mission in the 19th century and attracted great support at home. Many travellers who set out to explore the interior of Africa reported that the slave trade was still flourishing there. In the opinion of many, the only way to eradicate slavery was to introduce Africans to what was seen as two of Britain's greatest assets – Commerce and Christianity, which, when combined, would lead to 'Civilization' and the death of the slave trade throughout the continent. Many missionaries, like the famous David Livingston devoted themselves to this end. He said: 'If my disclosures

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14.8.2006

should lead to the suppression of the Slave Trade, I shall regard that as a greater matter by far than the discovery of all the sources of the Nile together.'

The Royal Navy was also involved in this campaign, again performing policing duties off the East African coast in a bid to curtail the transport of slaves.