

BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL
BLAKE MUSEUM



BRIDGWATER AND THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE

By Brian Smedley



*Seal of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade,
1787*

Credits

The text is abridged from Brian Smedley's article on the Westover Web page, online. The portraits are from the Blake Museum collection. The seal in the head of the first page is from MediaWiki Commons and is in the Public Domain

Of all the great Bridgwater firsts, the most inspiring, morally uplifting and mildly unexpected, was the claim to be the first town to petition Parliament against the evil transatlantic slave trade, whereby some 12 million Africans were forcibly removed from their homes and compelled to work as slaves in sugar plantations of the West Indies and the cotton fields of the Americas.

Origins of the Slave Trade --Portuguese slavers

Although it was the Portuguese Empire builders in the 15th century that had first got involved in the trading and exploitation of African Slaves, largely along the Gold Coast

(modern-day Ghana). During the Elizabethan period it was the seafarer John Hawkins who led the way, setting up a slave trading syndicate of wealthy merchants and publishing a book *An Alliance to Raid for Slaves* (1568). The Slave Trade reached its height in the 18th century at the same time as Britain was leading the world in terms of the industrial revolution and empire building

Bristol grows rich on the profits King Charles II and then his brother James II founded the Royal Africa Company to exploit the slave trade in Africa, backed by the use of the Royal Navy and Army in their stated quest for Gold, silver, negroes and slaves. Bristol merchant ships led the way in taking largely metal trade goods -- copper and brass -- to Africa made in the newly industrialised Avon valley to pay for the slaves; the same ships that took trade goods to Africa then took slaves to the West Indies and America and then brought back sugar, tobacco and rum to England -- The notorious Triangular

Trade. When in the 1720s Queen Square was built in Bristol it contained the offices of no less than 20 African merchants. Bristol-born Edward Colston (1636-1721) a Tory MP and Member of the Royal Africa Company, had moved to London as a young man, where he remained for the rest of his life. He devoted his fortune to philanthropy, founding schools and almshouses in Bristol, but his name is now the subject of controversy in Bristol because of the way he made his money. By the time of Colston's death, Bristol merchants were responsible for enslaving 16,000 Africans a year.

Bridgwater's Own Slave History

849 men from the West Country, including Bridgwater, were, as a result of the Monmouth rebellion and the battle of Sedgemoor in 1685, sentenced to transportation to the West Indies to become slaves, cutting sugar cane, alongside native inhabitants and a small number of imported Africans. Bridgwater is a famously radical town, so the 18th Century was no exception. By the mid-18th Century Bridgwater had recovered from the disasters of the 17th century civil wars and rebellions and was becoming a rich little market town with a bustling seaport and newly gentrified homes along Castle street, built on the site of the old Castle that had been destroyed after the civil war siege in 1645, and most importantly was a centre of non-conformist radicalism, with largely a Whig (Liberal) council in the town but a Tory pair of MPs with a vote largely drawn from the gentry.

The National Picture – Radical Civil Servant, Granville Sharp

London, in the 18th century, probably had a black population of around 10,000. It was regarded as 'fashionable' to have a black servant, but in fact the legal situation was unclear and many were press-ganged from

the streets by slavers and sold into the trade. In 1772 a court case brought by Granville Sharp supporting the black Briton James Somersett in his bid not to be sent to the West Indies and established a ruling by Lord Mansfield, that set a precedent that slavery could not exist in England without an act of Parliament – and there hadn't been one, so the Common Law precedent that "No man can have property in another" was upheld. *Sharp was a failed linen-draper and worked as a civil servant in the Ordnance Office, and was self-taught in law. In 1774 the American War of Independence broke out and Britain was awash with arguments for and against liberation, self determination and imperialism, so that when in 1781 the case of the *Zong* occurred, another court battle loomed. The *Zong* was a British slave ship whose masters had simply thrown 133 of their black slaves overboard and attempted to claim the loss against their insurance policy. Sharp and his colleagues were again in court trying to prosecute the ship owners who of course were found not guilty.

The Quaker Petition

Following pressure from American Quakers, who from early in the C18 had disowned any member of the sect who kept slaves, the London Quakers in 1783 presented the first petition to Parliament with 273 names on it calling for an end to the practice. The Quakers were world leaders in the fight against slavery with the simple viewpoint "How can one man own another if all are created equal". The Quaker petition was read by Sir Charles Wray, Whig MP for Westminster. Lord North-spoke for the Tory Government and praised the Quakers as 'mild and humane' but then tabled the petition saying it would be impossible to abolish the slave trade. However, many also saw Quakers as 'troublemakers' who refused

to swear oaths and were barred from parliamentary activity and so it was no surprise that the petition made no headway. What was needed was people through their elected representatives to step up to the mark and make the case.

The Bridgwater Petition

In 1785 Bridgwater stepped up to the mark and on May 2nd submitted the first petition from any town in the country. How did this come about? John Chubb (1746-1818) was a merchant and artist. Much of his work can be seen in the Blake Museum. He was a town councillor and crucially he was also a radical Whig and was in touch regularly with the national leader of the Whigs, Charles James Fox, on occasion riding out to the Pipers coaching inn at Ashcott to secretly meet with him. Fox was a major figure in British politics and was the rival to the Tory Government of Lord North that had fought so hard to suppress the American colonies. The war ended with a short-lived coalition between the two only to be replaced by George III who appointed a new solely Tory administration under William Pitt (the Younger). The 1780's was a decade of turmoil which started with Britain recoiling from losing its American possessions and ended with the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, which drew party lines even wider with Fox supporting and Pitt opposing.

Key Bridgwater Figures



John Chubb



Charles James Fox



Benjamin Allen



William Tuckett

Another key Bridgwater figure was George White, a local clergyman based at Huntspill, and an ardent opponent of the Slave Trade. Yet another was Benjamin Allen, an influential merchant and Whig who had on a couple of occasions even won the Parliamentary seat for his party from the Tories. In 1780 Allen lost the election but continued on the Borough Council as an active Whig. Another prominent citizen was Robert Anstice (1757-1845) a ship owner, merchant and civil engineer and natural historian. The final piece of the jigsaw was William Tuckett, who happened to be the Mayor of Bridgwater. Tuckett had been a merchant in the Americas and had witnessed the Slave Trade at first hand and so it didn't take much persuading by Chubb and White that he and his town could play a role in ending it. But there were others on the Borough Council whose family names still permeate the town to this day – Baulch, Giles, Gould, Marchand, Phelps, Parsons, Sealey and Woolen to name but a few. John Chubb Charles James Fox Benjamin Allen William Tuckett

The petition.

“The humble petition of the inhabitants of Bridgwater showeth, that your petitioners, reflecting with the deepest sensibility on the deplorable condition of that part of the human species, the African Negroes, who by the most

flagitious means are reduced to slavery and misery in the British colonies, beg leave to address this honourable house in their behalf, and to express a just abhorrence of a system of oppression, which no prospect of private gain, no consideration of public advantage, no plea of political expediency, can sufficiently justify or excuse. That, satisfied as your petitioners are that this inhuman system meets with the general execration of mankind, they flatter themselves the day is not far distant when it will be universally abolished. And they most ardently hope to see a British parliament, by the extinction of that sanguinary traffic, extend the blessings of liberty to millions beyond this realm, hold up to an enlightened world a glorious and merciful example, and stand foremost in the defence of the violated rights of human nature.” *Flagitious = Extremely wicked, deeply criminal.*

The Westminster Front

Bridgwater’s 2 MPs were Alexander Hood (1726-1814) a wellrespected Naval commander and the Hon. Anne Poulett. Born in 1711, Poulett died 2 months after the petition was presented at the age of 74, having represented Bridgwater for some 16 years. On May 2nd 1785 they presented the petition to Parliament....where it was ordered to “lie on the table”...which was parliamentary shorthand for “being politely ignored”. Poulett and Hood reported back “....there did not appear the least disposition to pay any further attention to it. Every one almost, says that the abolition of the slavetrade must throw the West Indian islands into convulsions, and soon complete their utter ruin. Thus, they will not trust Providence for its protection in so pious an undertaking.” For the Tory MPs, in fact, this was always going to be the case because most of them had some involvement in the Slave Trade one way or another. Their constituencies would suffer if it ended. But

Bridgwater had made its point, and it was apt that the first petition came from a town that exactly 100 years before had suffered the same fate as the slaves they now showed solidarity with.

From Petition to Abolition

Another key visitor to Bridgwater at this time was Thomas Clarkson who was researching the evils of the slave trade and amassing evidence. Whilst visiting Bristol in 1787 he was told he ought really to go down and see Bridgwater, which he did and met Chubb, Tuckett and White. Clarkson recorded his visit to the town in July 1787. “Friday 20th Got on horseback at Six O’Clock, rode to Cross in Somersetshire. The Country is extremely beautiful, variegated by Hills & Valleys. About 12 or 13 miles from Bristol. There is a beautiful View on the right hand of the Bristol Channel & the Glamorganshire Hills – But the Day was rainy, and the Prospect in some measure prevented. I was almost wet through. Arrived at Cross which is 18 miles in two Hours & 10 at 8 o Clock. Got on Horseback at eleven – arrived at Bridgewater, which is 18 miles, a little after one – It rained a great Part of the Time. – The Country from Cross to Bridgewater is a low, flat, marshy Country – Dined at Bridgewater – In the Evening waited upon Alderman Sealy, and the Mayor Mr Crandon, who told me he had disposed of my Summaries to the Gentlemen of the Corporation; that he would call an Hall in a Fortnight for the Purpose, and that he had little Doubt of succeeding; at the same Time, he would endeavour to recommend the same Conduct to the Towns People in order that the Town of Bridgewater might be wholly unanimous” He later went on to note “...called a meeting but found people already supported abolition”. From 1785-1788 a further 183 petitions were sent to parliament, notably the Manchester Petition which had been signed by 10,639 – 20% of the entire city at the time. However, the Abolitionists still had to

change this growing popular support into political change. The publication of Clarkson's pamphlet and then book, *An essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species, particularly the African*, translated from a Latin Dissertation, (1786) boosted the abolitionist campaign with the foundation of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 and its prominent figure William Wilberforce, converted to the cause by Clarkson's evidence, led the Parliamentary campaign as an Independent MP and made his maiden speech in 1789. An Abolition Bill was rejected by the Tory government in 1791 by 163 votes to 88 so a further 519 petitions containing over 390,000 signatures flooded Parliament. In 1792 a bill was actually passed but only when amended to a 'gradual' ban (which meant 'never'). However, the fight against the slave trade is not just about the role of liberal white crusaders but also of rebellion and revolt by black people. There had been many uprisings but none more crucial than the Slave Revolt in Haiti in 1804 which showed the 'gradual' reformers that they couldn't keep such an unjust system going indefinitely without the people taking matters into their own hands. Finally it was Fox, on the collapse of the Pitt Government in 1806, who was able to introduce legislation to abolish the Slave Trade with the Slave Trade Act in 1807 (114 for and 15 against).

Slavery Abolished

The Congress of Vienna, which concluded the Napoleonic wars in 1815, passed the motion declaring that "the Slave Trade desolated Africa, degraded Europe and afflicted humanity" and that it should be ended. The American Government passed an abolition bill in 1807 as well, but it was to take a civil war in the 1860s to finally determine the freedom of African-Americans.

Bridgwater - a little town with a lot of influence.

Meanwhile, back in Britain It was the radical reforming Government of the 1830s that introduced the Slavery Abolition Act (1833)...well, 'radical reforming' always ever only half true when Liberals are involved...so in fact the key part of the bill was 'compensation to the slave owners'!! Today, the prohibition on slavery and servitude is codified under Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights, incorporated into UK law by the Human Rights Act 1998. Article 4 of the Convention also bans forced or compulsory labour.

Blake Museum is owned by Bridgwater Town Council

and managed by volunteers from The Friends of Blake Museum

(Registered Charity 1099815)

www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk/

Version 1: 15 April 2018