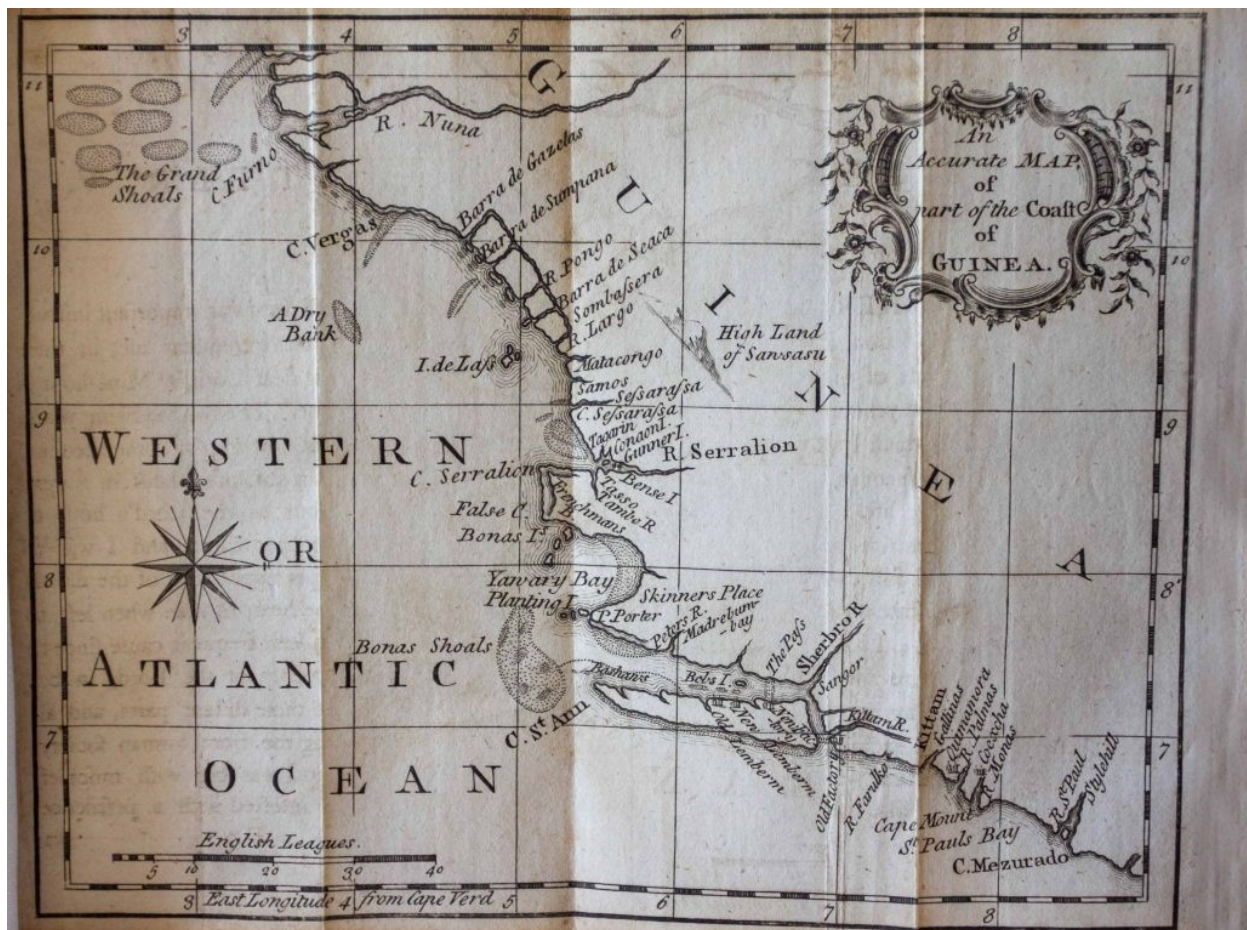


# John Newton (1725 - 1807)

## Enslaver to Abolitionist

This resource pack quotes directly from 18th / early 19th century historical sources and contains details about the attitudes towards, treatment of, and violence towards people who were enslaved and trafficked from Africa during that time



*An Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of John Newton,*  
1764, Cowper & Newton Museum



COWPER & NEWTON MUSEUM

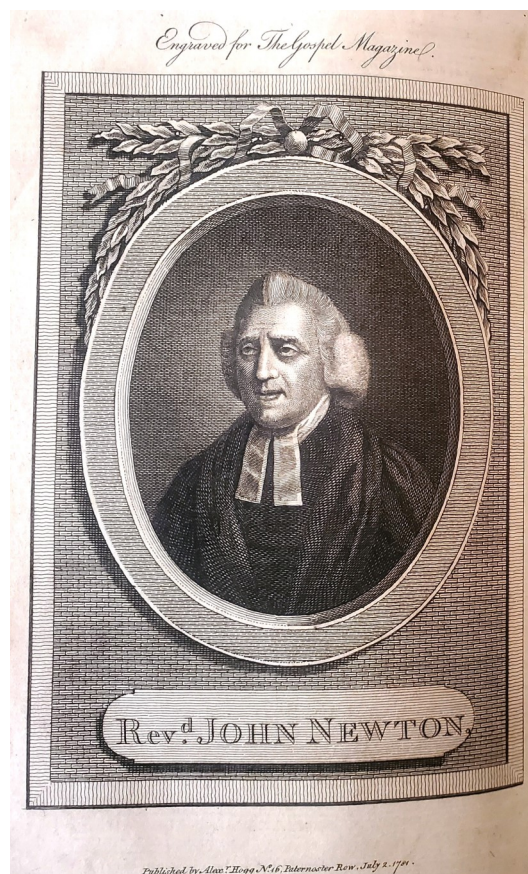
# Life of John Newton from available Primary Sources

Date in the Old Style ie before the move to the Gregorian Calendar

24th July 1725*	Born in Wapping, London
11th July 1732*	Mother died
1733-35	Sent to a boarding school in Stratford, Essex
1735-43	Age 11 began work at sea with his father; mostly on Mediterranean voyages
25th Feb 1743*	Press-ganged to <i>HMS Harwich</i>
9th May 1745*	In Maderia transferred to a merchant or slave trading ship
1745-47	Land based slave trader on the Guinea coast / kept captive by his Master
Feb 1747	Voyage home began on the ship <i>Greyhound</i>
21st March 1748	Storm at sea that began his return to his faith
Aug 1748 - Dec 49	First Mate on the <i>Brownlow</i> , slaving ship
12th Feb 1750	Married Mary Catlett at St Margaret's, Rochester
Aug 1750 - Oct 51	Master of the <i>Duke of Argyle</i> , slaving ship
June 1752 - 54	2 voyages as Master of the <i>African</i> , slaving ship
Aug 1755	Began work as Tide Surveyor in Liverpool
4th Aug 1758	Committed himself to enter the ministry
September 1762	Writing as 'Anonymous' in anti slavery pamphlet by Anthony Benezet, a Quaker abolitionist
29th April 1764	Ordained deacon
27th May 1764	First service as Curate at St Peter & St Paul in Olney
17th June 1764	Ordained priest
Aug 1764	Authentic Narrative published
Young William Wilberforce visited Newton in Olney with his Uncle and Aunt	
Nov 1772	Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw visited Newton in Olney
Dec 1772	Wrote the words for 'Amazing Grace'

1st Jan 1773	'Amazing Grace' sermon at morning service
1779	<i>Olney Hymns</i> published
8th Dec 1779	Rector of St Mary Woolnoth, London
1785	Met William Wilberforce in London
Jan 1788	<i>Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade</i> published
1788	Gave evidence before the Privy Council for the report on the slave trade commissioned by Prime Minister, William Pitt
1790	Provided evidence to the Select Committee of the House of Commons
Held monthly prayer meetings in London in support of the abolitionists	

1791	Preached against the Slave Trade
1792	Preached against the Slave Trade
1794	Preached against the Slave Trade
1797	Preached against the Slave Trade
1804	Letter to William Wilberforce
21st Dec 1807	Newton died



*The Gospel Magazine*, 1781,  
Cowper & Newton Museum



' The reader may perhaps wonder, as I now do myself, that, knowing the state of this vile traffic to be as I have described, and abounding with enormities which I have not mentioned, I did not, at the time, start with horror at my own employment, as an agent in promoting it. Custom, example, and interest, had blinded my eyes. I did it ignorantly; for I am sure had I thought of the slave trade, then, as I have thought of it since, no considerations would have induced me to continue in it. Though my religious views were not very clear, my conscience was very tender, and I durst not have displeased God, by acting against the light of my mind. Indeed a slave ship, while upon the coast, is exposed to such innumerable and continual dangers, that I was often then, and still am, astonished that any one, much more that so many, should leave the coast in safety. I was then favoured with an uncommon degree of dependence upon the providence of God, which supported me; but this confidence must have failed in a moment, and I should have been overwhelmed with distress and terror, if I had known, or even suspected, that I was acting wrongly. I felt the disagreeableness of the business very strongly. The office of a gaoler, and the restraints under which I was forced to keep my prisoners, were not suitable to my feelings; but I considered it as the line of life which God, in his providence had allotted me, and as a cross which I ought to bear with patience and thankfulness till he should be pleased to deliver me from it. Till then, I only thought myself bound to treat the slaves under my care with gentleness, and to consult their ease and convenience so far as was consistent with the safety of the whole family of whites and blacks on board my ship.'

### *Letters to a Wife, 1793*

This quote is Newton's note below letters written in 1753 to his wife when on his second African journey as Captain of a slaving ship.



COWPER & NEWTON MUSEUM

‘This man had several factories, and white servants, in different places ; particularly one in Kittam, the river I spoke of, which runs so near along the sea-coast. I was soon appointed to go there, where I had a share in the management of business, jointly with another of his servants. We lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied.’

*‘An Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of John Newton’, 1764*

Describing his participation in late 1746 to early 1747 in the land based slave trade

‘My business in this voyage, while upon the Coast, was to sail from place to place in the long-boat to purchase slaves.’

*‘An Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of John Newton’, published 1764*

August 1748 – Dec 1749, 1st Mate aboard the slave ship the ‘*Brownlow*’

Monday 12th November 1750

‘This morning Mr Clow showed me 7 slaves out of which I picked 4, viz 3 men, 1 woman’

Captain’s Journal

Captain of the slave ship the ‘*Duke of Argyle*’.



11<sup>th</sup> December 1752

‘...By the favour of Divine Providence made a timely discovery today that the slaves were forming a plot for an insurrection. Surprised 2 of them attempting to get off their irons, and upon farther search in their rooms, upon the information of 3 of the boys, found some knives, stones, shot, etc, and a cold chissel. Upon enquiry there appeared 8 principally concerned to move in projecting the mischief and 4 boys in supplying them with the above instruments. Put the boys in irons and slightly in the thumbscrews to urge them to a full confession.’

Captain's Journal

Captain of the slave ship the '*African*'.

Friday 9th February 1753

‘.When we were putting the slaves down in the evening, one that had been sick jumped overboard. Got him in again but he dyed immediately between his weakness and the salt water he had swallowed, tho I imagine he would have lived but a little while being quite worn out ...’

Captain's Journal

Captain of the slave ship the '*African*'.

,



July 3rd June 1753

‘...in the morning Mr Guichard went off with me to view the slaves. When came on shore again, after comparing orders and intelligence, he judged it best for the concern to sell here, if I approved it, without which, he was pleased to say, he would do nothing, tho my letters from the owners referred me wholly to his direction. It seems by all I can learn that this is likely to prove as good a market as any of the neighbouring islands; and as for Jamaica or America, I should be extremely loth to venture so far, for we have had the men slaves so long on board that their patience is just worn out, and I am certain they would drop fast had we another passage to make.’

Captain's Journal

Captain of the slave ship the '*African*'.

,

21st February 1754

‘... the disadvantage of being obliged to pass so much of my time in this distasteful climate and employment ...’

June 1756

‘This I acknowledge among the numerous interpositions of divine providence in my favour, by which I was preserved from the evils of a troublesome, ruinous voyage (as it has since proved); was brought out of a way of life, disagreeable to my temper, and inconvenient to my profession...’

Newton's diary, Princeton University Library , John Newton Collection CO199.



*'The following Relation is inserted at the Request of the Author, a Person whose Candour may be depended upon.*

'That I may contribute all in my Power towards the Good of Mankind, by inspiring any of its individuals with a suitable Abhorrence for that detestable Practice of trading in our Fellow-Creatures, and in some Measure atone for my Neglect of Duty as a Christian, in engaging in that wicked Traffic, I offer to their serious Consideration some few Occurrences of which I was an Eye-witness. That being struck with the wretched and affecting Scene, they may foster that humane Principle, which is the noble and distinguished Characteristic of Man, and improve it to the benefit of their Children's Children. ....'

*'Anonymous' in 'A Short Account of that Part of Africa Inhabited by the Negroes, and the Manner by which the Slave-Trade is Carried On', published in September 1762 by the Quaker abolitionist, Anthony Benezet.*

'During the time I was engaged in the slave trade, I never had the least scruple as to its lawfulness. I was upon the whole satisfied with it, as the appointment Providence had worked out for me; yet it was, in any respects, far from eligible. It is, indeed, accounted a genteel employment and is usually profitable, though to me it did not prove so, the Lord, seeing that a large increase of wealth would not be good for me. However, I considered myself a sort of gaoler or turnkey and I was sometimes shocked with an employment that was perpetually conversant with chains, bolts and shackles. In this view I had often petitioned in my prayers that the Lord (in his own time) would be pleased to fix me in a more humane calling, and (if it might be) place me where I might have more frequent converse with his people and ordinances and freed from those long separations from home which very often were hard to bear.'

*'An Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of John Newton', published 1764*





‘As you are a friend to Liberty and Mankind, you will not be sorry to hear that I have a pamphlet in the press (which I hope will be published in a week or ten days) upon the African Slave Trade. On this subject I can write as an eyewitness and something more, for I was too long actively engaged in it. As this business is now coming before Parliament I thought myself bound to declare what I know.’

‘I could have made the slave pamphlet larger, but I hope what I published will answer my purpose to prove me a competent and not a partial witness. The eyes of the public are now generally against business. It cannot be set aside at once, but I hope it will go downhill and not quite stop till it reaches the bottom.’

Newton letter to John Ryland Junior about the publication of his *‘Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade’*, published 1788

‘I think I should have quitted it sooner had I considered it as I now do to be unlawful and wrong. But I never had a scruple upon this head at the time; nor was such a thought ever suggested to me by a friend. What I did I did ignorantly; considering it as the line of life which Divine Providence had allotted me ....’

‘I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.’

‘Though unwilling to give offence to a single person, in such a cause, I ought not to be afraid of offending many, by declaring the truth. If, indeed, there can be many, whom even interest can prevail upon to contradict the common sense of mankind, by pleading for a commerce so iniquitous, so cruel, so oppressive, so destructive, as the African Slave Trade!’

*‘Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade’*, John Newton, published 1788



'I make no apology for speaking publicly against this trade. I dare not. Should I be silent; my Conscience would speak loudly, knowing what I know. Nor could I expect a blessing on my Ministry—tho' I should speak of the sufferings of Jesus, till I was hoarse.'

Newton's inscription within his own annotated copy of the Abstract

*An Abstract of the Evidence delivered before a Select Committee of the House of Commons  
in the Years 1790 and 1791, London, James Philips, 1791*

'When I was assured that Mr Wilberforce would renew his motion in the House this session, I preached (as I did last year) about the slave-trade. I think myself bound in conscience to bear testimony at least, and to wash my hands from the guilt which if persisted in, now things have been so thoroughly investigated and brought to light, will, I think, constitute a national sin of scarlet and crimson dye. A motion since made in the Common Council for a petition to parliament on the subject has been negatived, If the city want a motto, I would furnish them with 'Virtus post nummas.' \* If the business miscarries again, I shall fear not only for the poor slaves, but for ourselves.'

\*Horace 'Virtue after money' (Money first)

Letter from Newton to his friend Rev 'd William Bull, 1792



*Come, and let us return unto the Lord, for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he has smitten, and he will bind us up. Hos vi.i In publico discrimine, omnis homo miles est.*

‘I should be inexcusable, considering the share I have formally had in that unhappy business, if, upon this occasion, I should omit to mention the African slave-trade. I do not rank this amongst our national sins, because I hope, and believe, a very great majority of the nation earnestly long for its suppression. But, hitherto, petty and partial interests prevail against the voice of justice, humanity, and truth. This enormity, however, is not sufficiently laid to heart. If you are justly shocked by what you hear of the cruelties practised in France, you would, perhaps, be shocked much more, if you could fully conceive of the evils and miseries inseparable from this traffic, which I apprehend, not from hearsay, but from my own observation, are equal in atrocity, and, perhaps superior in number, in the course of a single year, to any or all the worst actions which have been known in France since the commencement of their revolution. There is a cry of blood against us; a cry accumulated by the accession of fresh victims, of thousands, of scores of thousands, I had almost said of hundreds of thousands, from year to year’

*‘Imminent Danger And The Only Sure Resource of This Nation: A Sermon Preached in The Parish Church of St Mary Woolnoth On Friday, February 28th, 1794 The day appointment for a General Fast’*



‘I have more than once confessed with shame in this pulpit, the concern I too long had in the African slave-trade. This trade, marked as it is with the epithet INFAMOUS by the vote of the House of Commons, it still carried on , and under the sanction of the legislature. Though the repeated attempts to procure the abolition of this trade have not succeeded, they have doubtless contributed to meliorate the condition of the blacks who are in a state of slavery in our West-India islands. The mode of their transportation thither from the African coast seems to be less tormenting and fatal than formerly. How far this trade may have been affected by the present war, I know not. When I was engaged in it, we generally supposed, for an accurate calculation was not practicable, that there were not less than a hundred thousand persons, men, women, and children, brought off the coast by the European vessels of all nations; and that an equal number lost their lives annually, by the wars and other calamities occasioned by the traffic, either on shore without reaching the ship, or on the shipboard before they reached the places of sale. It was supposed that more than half, perhaps three fifths of the trade was in the hands of the English. If the trade is at present carried out on to the same extent, and nearly in the same manner, while we are delaying from year to year to put a stop to our part of it, the blood of many thousands of our helpless, much injured fellow-creatures is crying against us. The pitiable state of the survivors, who are torn from their nearest relatives, connexions, and their native land, must be taken into account. Enough of this horrid scene. I fear the African trade is a national sin, for the enormities which accompany it are now generally known; and though perhaps the greater part of the nation would be pleased if it were suppressed, yet, as it does not immediately affect their own interest, they are passive. The shop tax, a few years since, touched them in a more sensible and tender part, and therefore petitions and remonstrances were presented and repeated, till the tax was repealed. Can we wonder that the calamities of the present war begin to be felt at home, when we ourselves wilfully and deliberately inflict much greater calamities upon the native Africans, who have never offended us? ‘

A sermon preached at the Parish Church of St Mary Woolnoth on December 19, 1797



‘Though I can scarcely see the paper before me, I must attempt to express my thankfulness to the Lord, and to offer my congratulations to you for the success which he has so far been pleased to give to your unwearied endeavours for the abolition of the slave trade, which I have considered as a millstone, sufficient, of itself sufficient, to sink such an enlightened and highly favoured nation as ours to the bottom of the sea.

My thoughts upon the subject have long been gloomy, for I was afraid the mistaken prejudices of the West-India planters would prove an insuperable obstacle; but I have a new proof now of what I always professed to believe, that to prayer, faith, and patient perseverance all things are possible.

Whether I who am within two months of entering my eightieth year shall live to see the accomplishment of his work, is only known to Him, in whose hands are our times and ways, but the hopeful prospect of its accomplishment will, I trust, give me daily satisfaction as long as my declining faculties are preserved.’

Letter from John Newton to William Wilberforce, June 5th 1804

*The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*





In 1893, the  
remains of John  
and Mary Newton  
were reinterred at  
St Peter & St Paul  
in Olney after being  
removed from the  
crypt of St Mary  
Woolnoth in  
London.

JOHN NEWTON, CLERK,  
Once an Infidel and Libertine,  
A servant of slaves in Africa ,  
Was,  
by the rich mercy  
of our Lord and Saviour  
JESUS CHRIST,  
Preserved, restored, pardoned,  
And appointed to preach the Faith  
He had long laboured to destroy;

...



John Newton, *An Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of John Newton*, 1764

Richard, Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton with General Remarks on his Life, Connections, and Character*, 1808

John Newton, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, 1788

John Newton, *Letters to a Wife*, 1793

Mary Phillips, *Memoir of the Life of Richard Phillips*, 1841

*Reports of the Lords of the Committee of Council appointed for the consideration of all matters relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations; submitting ... the evidence and information they have collected in consequence of His Majesty's Order in Council, dated the 11th of February, 1788, concerning the present state of the Trade to Africa, and particularly the Trade in Slaves, etc. Great Britain, Board of Trade* , 1789

*Minutes of the evidence taken before a committee of the House of Commons, being a Select Committee, appointed on the 23rd day of April 1790: to take the examination of the several witnesses ordered by the House to attend the Committee of the whole House, to whom it is referred to consider further of the circumstances of the slave trade* , 1790

*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 1st ed., 1808

*The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, 1840

Extracts from Newton's journals for the slaving journeys of the *Duke of Argyle* and the *African* are included in *Journal of a Slave Trader (John Newton 1750-1754)*' Edited, with an introduction, by Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell. The original journals are in The National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, with some pages digitised on the NMM website

[cowperandnewtonmuseum.org.uk/learning](http://cowperandnewtonmuseum.org.uk/learning)

[cowperandnewtonmuseum.org.uk/john-newton-1725-1807](http://cowperandnewtonmuseum.org.uk/john-newton-1725-1807)

[cowperandnewtonmuseum.org.uk/amazing-grace-250-virtual-exhibition](http://cowperandnewtonmuseum.org.uk/amazing-grace-250-virtual-exhibition)

**This Learning Resource Pack is free to reproduce for educational establishments, libraries and other non-commercial organisations.**

Copyright: Cowper & Newton Museum

