

# The Abolitionists



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This resource quotes directly from 18th / early 19th century historical sources and contains language and details about the attitudes towards people who were enslaved and trafficked from Africa during that time which some readers may find upsetting

## Fact Files: Britain's Role in The Transatlantic Slave Trade

The Transatlantic Slave Trade, or 'African trade' as it became known, saw Britain become a world economic power at the expense of millions of African lives. In Britain, the Transatlantic Slave Trade gave many British people access to commodities such as sugar, coffee, and cocoa for the first time, helping to create a new lifestyle, culture and society, as well as jobs and business opportunities. Many British people benefited, even if they were not directly involved in the slave trade.

As demand in Britain grew for these commodities and the benefits they offered, so did the slave trade in the British colonies. British plantations were profitable and made many British people rich because they used enslaved Africans to grow crops like sugar, coffee, and cocoa. Africans who had been kidnapped, were sent to British colonies in the Caribbean and the Americas and forced to work unpaid on British plantations against their will.

### The Abolitionist Movement

The Abolitionist or Anti-Slavery Movement in Britain began in the 1780s. It was a humanitarian movement that believed slavery to be immoral. Abolitionists wanted to end Britain's role in the slave trade and slavery in British colonies.

It was a diverse movement, attracting men and women from all social classes, for a variety of reasons. For example, the movement included gender-specific groups like the Birmingham Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves, as well as individuals inspired by faith, religion, law, and politics, such as the Quakers and Anglicans.

The Movement also gave people who weren't allowed to vote a way to campaign for change. Not all men were allowed to vote until 1918, and not all women until 1928.

### What did the Abolitionists do?

The Abolitionists' campaign to end slavery included:

- Raising awareness – by revealing the inhumane practices involved in slavery to the British public
- Consumer activism – by encouraging British people to boycott products produced using enslaved labour such as sugar and rum, and supporting alternative products instead

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## How did the Abolitionists campaign?

The Abolitionist Movement used a wide range of ways to campaign for the end of slavery, many of which are still used by campaign groups today, including:

- Legal challenges inspired by Somersett's Case in 1772
- Petitions signed by the public – 519 petitions were presented to the House of Commons in 1792 – the largest number of petitions at that time focused on a single topic
- Lobbying Parliament and MPs
- Fundraising
- Awareness raising talks and events
- Writing letters to newspapers
- Documenting evidence from those who witnessed the slave trade and slavery first hand including former enslaved Africans and British workers such as dockworkers and ships' surgeons
- Distributing printed leaflets
- Creating art and culture with an anti-slavery message including poetry, artworks, imagery, and books sharing people's first-hand experiences

## Abolitionist Societies

The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was set up on 22 May 1787 by 12 men, including Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp. Clarkson and Sharp were Anglicans, which at the time meant they could have more influence in Parliament, compared to members who were Quakers. The society's aim was to raise public awareness in Britain of the horrific and inhumane practices involved in slavery and the slave trade.

The Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions was founded in 1823 by prominent abolitionists, including William Wilberforce and Thomas Fowell Buxton. The society's aim was to abolish slavery throughout the British colonies.

## The Clapham Sect

The Clapham Sect, nicknamed the Clapham Saints, were an influential group of social reformers based in Clapham, London. The group was active from the 1780s to the 1840s and its members included MPs, educators, writers, bankers, and business leaders, including William Wilberforce.

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Inspired by their evangelical Christian beliefs, the group campaigned for social justice. Alongside the abolition of slavery, they also aimed to improve conditions inside British factories and prisons.

Some members of the Clapham Sect established the first British colony in Africa, Sierra Leone. The colony was founded to re-home former enslaved Africans and create trading links between Britain and West Africa outside of the slave trade. However, after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the British authorities in Sierra Leone were still using slave labour.

### Women's Societies

Women played a significant role in the abolition of slavery. The first anti-slavery society for women was the Birmingham Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves (later known as the Female Society for Birmingham) founded in 1825.

The society campaigned against slavery using consumer activism. Members encouraged shops and shoppers to boycott sugar produced using enslaved labour in the West Indies and the Caribbean. They campaigned by distributing leaflets, holding meetings, visiting people at home, and asking people to sign petitions.

The society's founding members included Lucy Townsend, Mary Lloyd, Elizabeth Heyrick, Sophia Sturge, and Sarah Wedgwood. Other women's groups soon followed, in towns and cities including Nottingham, Sheffield, Leicester, Glasgow, Norwich, London, Darlington and Chelmsford. By 1831, there were 73 women's groups campaigning against slavery.

### Sugar boycotts

Sugar boycotts proved to be a highly successful campaigning tool for the Abolitionist Movement. The sugar boycott of 1791 saw over 300,000 people refusing to buy sugar produced by enslaved labour. Led by women, sugar boycotts returned in the 1820s to campaign for the abolition of slavery throughout the British colonies.

## Olaudah Equiano



*Olaudah Equiano*  
or  
GUSTAVUS VASSA,  
*the African*

The Abolitionist Movement included many individuals who campaigned for change. Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, had been enslaved as a child in Africa (southern Nigeria), and taken to the Caribbean. He managed to buy his freedom in 1766 and lived as a freed man in London, marrying an English woman (Susannah Cullen) and having two daughters.

He was part of an Abolitionist group called the Sons of Africa. His autobiography, "*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*", helped to abolish the slave trade by sharing his story and experiences with the British

public. Equiano's book was a huge success and he travelled around Britain campaigning against slavery.

Equiano worked alongside both African and British abolitionists. In 1788, he petitioned Queen Charlotte (wife of King George III), appealing to her 'benevolence' and 'humanity' and asking for freedom from slavery.

**Did you know?** *Some historians believe Queen Charlotte had African ancestry.*

## Mary Prince

Mary Prince was born in Bermuda to an enslaved African family. She was bought and sold as a slave in the Caribbean and brought to England as a servant in 1828, before managing to secure her freedom. Mary had never been given the opportunity to read and write, but that didn't stop her from sharing her story. Instead, Mary dictated her experiences, which were published as "*The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*" in 1831.

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Mary's story was the first account of a Black enslaved woman to be published in Britain and her book was in demand. By bringing the horrors of slavery to life through her personal, first-hand experiences, Mary helped to empower the anti-slavery movement and influence public opinion against slavery in the British colonies.

### Ottobah Cugoano



Ottobah Cugoano was a former enslaved man living in England. As a member of the anti-slavery group, the Sons of Africa, he wrote about his experiences and protested against the slave trade. His book, *“Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species”*, was published in 1787. Cugoano sent his book to King George III.

Image extract from Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

### Ignatius Sancho

Ignatius Sancho used letter writing to share his thoughts and opinions, including writing editorials and commentaries for newspapers. After managing to escape from a life of slavery, Sancho wrote extensively on the slave trade, and about the discrimination that enabled it. He also opened his own grocery store.

*“Make human nature they study – wherever thou residest – whatever the religion – or the complexion – study their hearts.”*

Frances Crewe helped to publish over 160 of Sancho's letters in 1782, in a hugely popular book called *“The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African”*. Sancho's son, William, went on to turn his father's grocery shop into a printing shop and bookstore.

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## John Newton, the Abolitionist

John Newton knew William Wilberforce MP as a boy, and it was through this friendship rekindled in London that he became actively involved with the Abolitionist movement. At that time, Newton was an ordained church minister, but in his earlier life had been both a land based slave trader and a captain of slave ships.

In 1748, returning to England from African where he had been working as a land based slave trader, a near shipwreck on the ship *Greyhound* found him praying to God for his safety. Although this experience contributed to Newton's spiritual awakening and the revisiting of his faith and beliefs, at that time it did not help him recognise that his role in the slave trade was at odds with Christian principles.

In 1788, Newton reflected on his time as a slaver and the slave trade in his pamphlet *'Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade'*:

*" a confession which ...comes too late...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."*

Newton's published 1788 admission contributed to the mass of information and interventions that brought an end to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and eventually slavery throughout the British colonies. However, Newton has been criticised by some for not acting sooner. After his spiritual conversion in 1748, Newton continued to work in the slave trade until 1754, aboard the slave ships *Brownlow*, *Duke of Argyle* and the *African*. Until 1764, he also continued to invest in the slaving operations of the slave ship owner, Joseph Manesty.

## John Newton's words on slave traders and owners

Newton published his pamphlet *'Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade'* in 1788, to help convince others of the evils of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. His words made people sit up and take notice when he gave evidence. For example, he described slave traders as:

*"Men who were destitute of the milk of human kindness."*

Newton had obviously given thought to the behaviours and practices that not only had he seen and heard, but that he had also engaged in:

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*“Surely, it must be allowed, that they who are long conversant with such scenes as these, are liable to imbibe a spirit of ferociousness, and savage insensibility, of which human nature, depraved as it is, is not, ordinarily, capable.”*

*“But unlimited power, instigated by revenge, and where the heart, by a long familiarity with the sufferings of slaves, is become callous, and insensible to the pleadings of humanity, is terrible.”*

He was making clear that the effects of slavery led to a permanent and damaging effect on the psyche of white slave traders and owners, as it had on the enslaved Africans.

### John Newton's words on the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Newton also described the debilitating and destructive impact the Transatlantic Slave Trade was having on all peoples, whether they were able to recognise it or not:

*“The nature and effects of that unhappy and disgraceful branch of commerce, which has long been maintained on the Coast of Africa, with the sole, and professed design of purchasing our fellow-creatures, in order to supply our West-India islands and the American colonies, when they were ours, with slaves; is now generally understood. So much light has been thrown upon the subject, by many able pens; and so many respectable persons have already engaged to use their utmost influence, for the suppression of a traffic, which contradicts the feelings of humanity; that it is hoped, this stain of our National character will soon be wiped out.”*

### John Newton's words on his own involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade

A trade *“so iniquitous, so cruel, so oppressive, so destructive”*.

*“If I attempt, after what has been done, to throw my mite into the public stock of information, it is less from an apprehension that my interference is necessary, than from a conviction, that silence, at such a time, and on such an occasion, would, in me, be criminal. If my testimony would not be necessary, or serviceable, yet, perhaps, I am bound, in conscience, to take shame to myself by a public confession, which, however sincere, comes too late to prevent, or repair, the misery and mischief to which I have, formerly, been accessory.”*



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The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the African Slave Trade, established in 1787, gave a copy of Newton's pamphlet to every Member of Parliament, in both the House of Commons, and the House of Lords.

*"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."*

*" And he said, What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground!" (Genesis 4:10)*

*"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. My headstrong passions and follies plunged me, in early life, into a succession of difficulties and hardships, which, at length, reduced me to seek a refuge among the Natives of Africa. There, for about the space of eighteen months, I was in effect, though without the name, a Captive and a Slave myself; and was depressed to the lowest degree of human wretchedness. Possibly, I should not have been so completely miserable had I lived among the Natives only, but it was my lot to reside with white men; for at that time, several persons of my own colour and language were settled upon that part of the Windward coast, which lies between Sierra-Leone and Cape Mount; for the purpose of purchasing and collecting Slaves, to sell to the vessels that arrived from Europe."*

### **John Newton's personal realisation of the evils of The Transatlantic Slave Trade and Slavery**

*"Thus I was unexpectedly freed from this disagreeable service. Disagreeable I had long found it; but 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 once suggested to me, by any friend. What I did, I did ignorantly; considering it as the line of life which Divine Providence had allotted me, and having no concern, in point of conscience, but to treat the Slaves, while under my care, with as much humanity as a regard to my own safety would admit.*

Newton admitted that this was *"a confession, which... comes too late....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."*

## Abolitionist campaigns

### Am I Not a Man and a Brother?

Just like campaign groups do today, the Abolitionist Movement created campaigns to share their message. One of the best known is a ceramic medallion created in 1787 by Josiah Wedgwood, the famous British potter and Abolitionist.

The design was based on a seal commissioned by the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The medallion itself was probably sculpted by Wedgwood's leading modeller, William Hackwood, before being mass produced. It shows an enslaved Black man in chains, asking "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?"

As a member of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Wedgwood didn't just help to create the medallion. He was involved in "promoting publications, meetings and petitions, and in canvassing the support of anyone whose voice might command respect."

Thousands of Wedgwood medallions were given away for free at anti-slavery meetings. Many people were not allowed to vote, and wearing the medallion gave men and women a way to voice their beliefs and protest against the slave trade.

In 1788, Wedgwood sent some medallions to Benjamin Franklin, an American Abolitionist and one of America's Founding Fathers. Franklin wrote to Wedgwood:

*"I am persuaded [the medallion] may have an Effect equal to that of the best written Pamphlet in producing favour to those oppressed people."*

The medallion became very popular in Britain, with men wearing them as shirt pins and coat buttons, and women wearing them as bracelets, brooches, and hairpins.

The British Abolitionist, Thomas Clarkson, wrote:

*"Some had them inlaid in gold on the lid of their snuff-boxes. Of the ladies, several wore them in bracelets and others had them fitted up in an ornamental manner as pins for their hair. At length the taste for wearing them became*

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*general, and thus a fashion...was seen for once in the honourable office of promoting the cause of justice, humanity, and freedom."*

The image and words displayed on the medallion went on to become widely used, in print, and on objects such as textiles and ceramics.

### **Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?**

It is thought that Sophia Sturge, a member of the Birmingham Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves, adapted Wedgwood's design to create a medallion featuring featuring a Black enslaved woman, with the words "Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?"

## Powerful images and evidence

The Abolitionist Movement also used powerful images to raise awareness. One of these is a diagram of the *Brookes* slave ship, drawn by Thomas Clarkson (a member of the London Committee of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade). The image captured the inhuman conditions for enslaved people aboard slave ships.

Widely shared in newspapers, pamphlets, and books, and via posters in public spaces such as coffee houses and inns, Clarkson wrote that the “*print seemed to make an instantaneous impression of the horror upon all who saw it, and was therefore instrumental, in consequence of the wide circulation given it, in serving the cause of the injured Africans.*”

The *Brookes* was one of nine slave ships measured for the 1788 Parliamentary enquiry into the British slave trade. The 900-page report detailed evidence provided by abolitionists including Thomas Clarkson and Olaudah Equiano.

Clarkson travelled the country to gather evidence for the enquiry, riding 35,000 miles and interviewing 20,000 sailors in 7 years. As well as gathering first-hand accounts of the slave trade from ships' crews, Clarkson also collected physical evidence - objects made in Britain and used to restrain, punish, and torture the enslaved, including handcuffs, leg shackles, thumbscrews and branding irons.

Clarkson also used objects to showcase the African craftsmanship and culture that was being impacted by the slave trade, including natural products like spices and cotton, and manufactured products such as woven and dyed fabrics. Few British people had any contact with Africa or African people at that time and many believed that as 'civilised' British people, they were superior to 'uncivilised' Africans. Clarkson used his collection of African objects, kept in a specially made wooden chest, to tackle this untruth and demonstrate the sophistication and skill of African craftspeople. He also wanted to show people that it was better to trade in raw materials and manufactured goods, not people, and that the slave trade was stifling Britain's trading opportunities. Clarkson's travelling museum helped to provide the Parliamentary enquiry with vital evidence into the slave trade. Clarkson wrote: “*I wished the council to see more of my African productions and manufactures, that they might...know what Africa was capable of affording instead of the Slave Trade...and that they might make a proper estimate of the...talents of the natives.*”

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## Books and poetry

Many supporters of the Abolitionist movement used writing to voice their opinions and protest against the slave trade.

**Amelia Alderson Opie** (1769-1853) wrote about the social issues of the day. Opie wrote two anti-slavery poems for children – *The Negro Boy's Tale* (1824) and the *Black Man's Lament* (1826).

*"Come, listen to my plaintive ditty,  
Ye tender hearts, and children dear!  
And, should it move souls to pity,  
Oh! try to end the griefs you hear."*

**William Cowper** (1731-1800) was an English poet and hymnwriter. His anti-slavery poems include *Charity* (1782), *The Task* (1784), *The Negro's Complaint* (1788), *Pity for Poor Africans* (1788), *The Morning Dream* (1788) and *Sweet Meat has Sour Sauce* (1788).

*"Forced from home and all its pleasures  
Afric's coast I left forlorn,  
To increase a stranger's treasures  
O'er the raging billows borne.  
Men from England bought and sold me,  
Paid my price in paltry gold;  
But, though slave they have enrolled me,  
Minds are never to be sold."*

**Hannah More** (1745-1833) was an English religious writer, poet and playwright. *Slavery: A Poem*, written in 1788, asks:

*"If Heaven has into being deigned to call  
Thy light, O Liberty! to shine on all;  
Bright intellectual Sun! why does thy ray  
To earth distribute only partial day?"*

**Thomas Day and John Bicknell** wrote *The Dying Negro: A Poetical Epistle* in 1773, which was quoted in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah*

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*Equiano'* (1789). The poem is about a runaway slave and it's thought to have inspired Josiah Wedgewood to campaign for the Abolitionist Movement.

*“Arm’d with thy sad last gift – the pow’r to die,  
They shafts, stern fortune, now I can defy;  
They dreadful mercy points at length the shore,  
Where all is peace, and men are slaves no more;  
This weapon, ev’n in chains, the brave can wield,  
And vanquish’d, quit triumphantly the field:  
Beneath such wrongs let pallid Christians live,  
Such they can perpetrate, and may forgive.”*

**John Harris** (1820-1884) was a Cornish poet. His poem *‘The Fall of Slavery’* (1838) celebrates the end of the slave trade.

*“Prayer is heard, the chain is riven,  
Shout it over land and sea;  
Slavery from earth is driven,  
And the manacled are free;  
Brotherhood in all the nations;  
What a glorious Jubilee!”*