





# The Anti Slavery Movement in Bath

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The movement against slavery is not a subject that readily comes to mind when recalling Bath's past, but Bath had an important anti-slavery movement during the Georgian and Victorian periods. Many Bath citizens actively supported the cause of abolition through meetings and petitions to their MP and to Parliament, and by establishing anti-slavery societies. Bath Quakers took direct action by inviting escaped American slaves to speak in their meeting house and opened 'Depots' to trade in non-slave products.

Bristol, Bath's close neighbour, profited from the trade in the Americas, and a commonly held view is that Bath was a beneficiary of the profits of the slave trade in sugar, cotton and tobacco. Bath was in daily contact with wealthy visitors from London, the biggest slave trading port in the world, however the only evidence of Bath's direct involvement in the slave trade appears to have been the manufacture and exporting of brass goods for the Africa trade. There were thirty brass mills operating in the Somerset area during the eighteenth century. The most easterly of these was established around 1729, or possibly earlier, by a consortium of Quakers on the newly created Weston [or Dutch] Island, Bath. This consortium was, for a time led by Abraham Darby. Undoubtedly a number of these mills manufactured Manillas, brass bracelets that were used as currency in Africa.

Quakers were the first and most vociferous opponents of the ownership and trade of slaves. The first petition against slavery was signed as early as 1688, in Germantown, Pennsylvania. By the 1750s Pennsylvania Quakers tightened their rules and by 1758 made slave trading an act of *misconduct*. In 1761 their London Yearly Meeting followed, issuing a strong *minute* against slave trading. On paper at least, Quakers had turned against the slave trade and, very possibly, against slavery itself.

Visitors to Bath who were prominent in the national debate about slavery and supported the popular opposition to the slave trade in Bath included Hannah More (1745–1833) and Thomas Clarkson (1760–1840). Clarkson even managed to get the usually conservative and anti-radical *Bath Chronicle* on the side of the abolitionists. Hannah More was a philanthropist, writer and anti slavery activist. She wrote a poem *Slavery* in 1788. Another visitor, Josiah Wedgwood (1730–95) also supported the movement, and manufactured anti-slavery medallions and black basalt wax seals engraved with the words 'Am I not a man And a Brother?' surrounding an image of a man bound in chains. The design was adapted from an earlier engraving by Thomas Bewick (1753–1828) of Newcastle upon Tyne. Wedgwood had a shop at 20 Milsom Street in Bath and freely distributed his

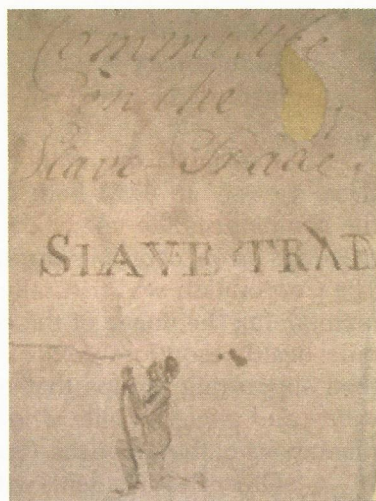


fig 2: Cover of minute book of the Meeting for Sufferings Committee on the slave trade 1783-1792.

fig 1: The Kneeling Slave - 'Am I not a Man and a Brother' (oil on canvas), English School, (18th century) / © Wilberforce House, Hull City Museums and Art Galleries, UK / Bridgeman Images

medallions and black basalt seals. He sent several thousand to US politician Benjamin Franklin. Another frequent visitor to Bath was William Wilberforce, whose name is most closely associated with abolition.

In January 1788 both Bath newspapers, the *Chronicle* and the *Journal*, gave coverage to the powerful declaration of the abolitionists at Manchester, to which the *Chronicle* added:

... That all friends of humanity would welcome the news that the slave trade, and treatment of the negroes in our West Indian Islands [which have been a disgrace in Europe] will become the subject of Parliamentary investigation.

Inevitably the authorities did not share these views. In 1792 Bath Corporation refused the abolitionists the use of the Guildhall for their meetings on six occasions during March and April. The Corporation was naturally more interested in maintaining the image of the city as a refined and quiet health resort for wealthy visitors from London than supporting groups that may have upset the ruling and powerful elite who had interests in the plantations of the Americas. (See appendix A).

Other Bath residents with West Indian trade interest included James Plunkett (of 4 Kings Circus) in Jamaica, and Edward Drax (of Queens Parade) in Barbados). The *Bath Journal* in 1773 and 1775 described both Plunkett and Drax as 'in possession of ye Larkhall', which during the eighteenth century was a private house for rent, that later became the Larkhall Inn. James Plunkett's will of 1776 states:

I give to Frederick my black servant ten pounds a year for his life and I desire he may live with my sister Margaret as long as she pleases.

fig 3: Anti slavery medallion by Josiah Wedgwood 1787 (British Museum)



This was not an inconsiderable sum for the time, but as a comparison he left his sister:

Margaret Plunkett during the term of her natural life the annuity of the yearly sum of one thousand pounds of lawful money. ...payable out of all messages lands and estates in the island of Jamaica.

It sounds as if Frederick had little choice but to continue as Margaret's servant!

In Matthew Parker's fascinating book, *The Sugar Barons*, the Drax family are extensively documented as one of the earliest plantation owners – Drax Hall still survives in Barbados, pictured on the cover of the book. A Drax descendant, Richard, currently represents the same seat in Parliament as at least six of his ancestors. Their Dorset estates of Charlborough were largely funded by the profits from Barbadian sugar. Recent research by University College London notes that Drax received £4,239 12s 6d compensation for 189 slaves in 1836. That is £22.43p pence per slave! Owners received



various amounts per slave depending on their skills and their profitability.

The government had succumbed to pressure and granted the slave owners in the British colonies a total of £ 20 million compensation. That is the equivalent of £ 17 billion today. The research from UCL reveals a list of names and addresses of sixty-six people resident in Bath in 1834 that applied for compensation for loss of their slaves. In all, these slave owners made one hundred and eleven claims. Among the claimants are 4 Church of England vicars and 22 women.

These names have been buried in the National Archives at Kew for nearly 200 years. The list of names and residences shows that it was not just the wealthy upper classes that owned slaves. The large number of women that are shown to be slave owners suggests that they may have inherited their slaves? However they acquired their slaves it did not prevent them for seeking compensation for loss of their 'property'!

Bath resident Hastings Elwin [1777-1852] a co-founder of Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution, was appointed as one of the Commissioners for Slave Compensation. There is a bust of him at BRLSI in Queen Square, Bath.

From 1791 onwards William Wilberforce (1759–1833) and his associates made many attempts to get an anti-slavery act through Parliament, but it was not until 1807 that the slave trade was abolished and not until 1833 that slavery was made illegal in all British colonies. Wilberforce was an evangelical Christian from Kingston-upon-Hull and an M.P. He was married to Barbara Ann Spooner (1771–1846) on 30th May 1797 at St Swithin's Church, Walcot, Bath. Wilberforce became the public figurehead of the campaign, but it would not have succeeded without the unceasing work of Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846), described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a 'moral steam engine', who took on the essential task of collecting every possible source of evidence. The work of Quakers was unceasing; they gave financial support and continually petitioned Parliament, enlisting others to voice their concerns about slavery as Quakers were barred from becoming MPs until 1822. On 20th October 1825 Bath's opposition to Negro slavery received more support by the establishment of the Bath Auxiliary Anti-Slavery Society. In 1828 2,000 Bath residents signed a petition condemning the trade, at a time when the city's population was approximately 50,000. Late in the campaign Wilberforce spoke at an anti-slavery meeting at the Assembly Rooms in Bath in 1830.

He suffered from ill health at this time; this meeting was reported in the *Bath Chronicle* as:

Mr Wilberforce then, in a very low voice addressed the meeting. He soon, however, increased in energy, and made a most animated and effective appeal....

Mr. Wilberforce died three days after the passing of the 1833 Act to abolish Slavery.

Despite the passing of the 1833 Act to abolish Slavery, there was still work to be done. Slavery remained legal in the United States until 1865.

## Women abolitionists

As the main purchasers of sugar, women were to play an important role in the Quaker anti-slavery movement and used their influence to boycott the purchase of the products of slavery. Emma Sophia Sturge opened an Anti-Slavery Depot in Bath that thrived for six years.

As equality between men and women in the Quaker movement was accepted practice, it was natural that women took an equal role in the abolitionist movement. However not all the leadership were supportive of their role – even Wilberforce gave instructions for leaders not to speak at women’s anti-slavery societies.

In 1851 the movement received a real boost with the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. When Stowe (1811–96) met Abraham Lincoln he allegedly greeted her with the words “so this is the little lady that started this great war” referring to the American Civil War that finally led to abolition of slavery. Over one and half million copies of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were in circulation in Britain during the 1850s: it was the best selling novel of the century, translated into thirty languages (including Welsh).

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was performed as a play at Bath’s Theatre Royal (fig 7 Point C) as early as 1852. Bath theatregoers supported 12 productions of *Uncle Tom* between 1852 and 1865 with each production having several performances a week.

In the book, one of the characters, Eliza, escaped and met with her husband George Harris, who had run away previously. They decided to attempt to escape to Canada, as a British Colony, slavery was illegal there. However, a slave hunter named Tom Loker tracked them. Eventually Loker and his men trapped Eliza and her family, causing George to push Loker down a cliff. Worried that Loker may die, Eliza convinced George to bring the slave hunter to a nearby Quaker settlement for treatment.

Harriet Stowe embarked on a lecture tour of the UK to promote the cause of emancipation. During her tour with her husband she met with Joseph Sturge at his Birmingham home. Elizabeth Heydrick (1789–1831), with the support of others, campaigned for a boycott of West Indian sugar in Leicester. In 1824, Heydrick published a pamphlet, *Immediate, not Gradual Abolition*, in which she urged the immediate emancipation of the slaves. The Anti-slavery Society was in favour of gradual emancipation, not wishing to upset the very strong pro-slavery lobby, whose stance was not unrelated to the £20,000,000 compensation paid out to slave owners in 1833.

## The Sturge Family

Joseph Sturge VI (1793–1859) was from Elberton, Gloucestershire. He was the fourth of twelve children, and from a Quaker family related to the Sturges of Lambridge, Bath. He joined his brother Charles in the grain importing business in Birmingham, which became the biggest in Britain (Quakers only traded in non-slave grains). He became interested in the plight of the slaves in Jamaica, visited the island several times, and wrote a number of books on the conditions of the slaves. Claire Midgely describes his further involvement as follows:

‘Joseph Sturge joined the abolition movement soon after his arrival in Birmingham in 1823. He pressed for immediate and full emancipation of slaves in British territories. When the Anti Slavery Society, founded in 1827, adopted a programme of reform rather

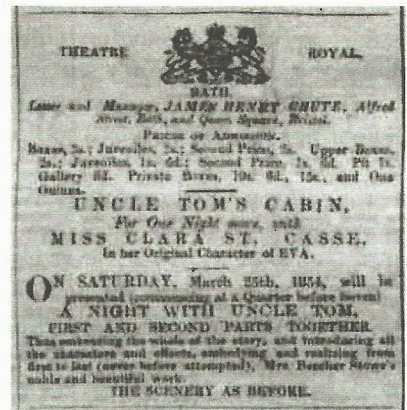


fig 4: Advertisement for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* from the *Bath Chronicle* March 1854.



than immediate abolition, Sturge left the society and helped to organise an energetic new body in 1831 called the Agency Committee. This Committee went straight to the grass roots, bringing innovative action into the anti slavery movement. The Committee set up neighbourhood meetings and lectures. It undertook mass leafleting, mass agitation and the recruitment of women to work as equals in the cause of immediate emancipation'.<sup>1</sup>

In 1840 Joseph Sturge's work against slavery was recognised with a marble monument in Falmouth, Jamaica.

In Edgbaston a memorial was erected to him in 1862, three years after his death, in front of a crowd of 12,000 and the plaque on his memorial in Edgbaston, Birmingham. The society that Sturge founded lives on today as the Anti-Slavery Society International. Sturge was also a member of the Chartist movement. He spoke at a Chartist meeting in the Guildhall in Bath on 22nd February 1844, the use of the room having been granted by the City Council, after an unsuccessful application had been made to the Mayor for his permission.

Joseph Sturge's sister Sophia (1795–1845) was one of Elizabeth Heydrick's supporters, helping to form the Birmingham Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves (later the Female Society for Birmingham). Sophia was devoted to her brother and worked as his bookkeeper and housekeeper. Although suffering from poor health from childhood, she was a woman of formidable energies and despite her disabilities she visited over 3,000 households to lobby support for the movement.

In his online article 'An American Adventure', Peter Sturge (the current Sturge historian) wrote about another member of the family:

Joseph Sturge VI's nephew, Thomas Marshall Sturge II (1820-1852) also born in Olveston, Gloucestershire moved to Weston-Super-Mare, where he set up his own business as a cabinet maker. A member of his local meeting of the Society of Friends, he was planning to marry his sweetheart, Emma Sophia Mundy from Bath, who was not 'in membership' of the Quakers. To this end she was already attending meetings for worship in preparation for her formal application for membership.<sup>2</sup>

During their courtship Emma became pregnant, a state that would prevent her attaining membership of the Society. Thomas, determined to marry Emma, took the decision to forfeit his own membership by marrying without the approval of the meeting, 'marrying out'. Emma's father, Horatio Nelson Mundy, was a butcher recorded at 5 Orange Grove from 1841 until 1863; he was also an overseer of the poor for Walcot parish.

In 1850 Thomas and Emma moved to America to start a new life. Thomas went up to the Great Lakes with his brother Frederick while Emma stayed with her four children in Williamsburg, New York. Unfortunately Thomas was killed in 1852 by a falling tree while helping to clear some land. He had only just bought fifty acres for \$200. Emma and the four children returned to England and settled in her hometown of Bath. Her children

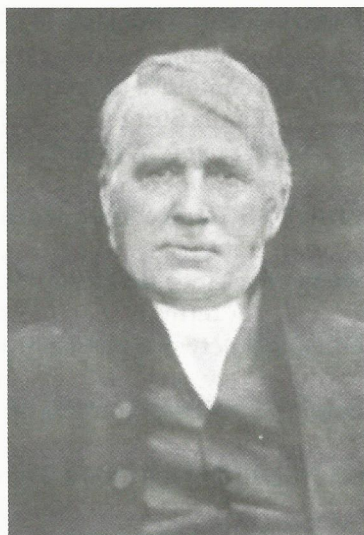


fig 5: Joseph Sturge 1793–1859

Ellen, Hannah, Thomas, and Rebecca attended the Friends school at Sidcot as their father had before them. Sidcot is a Quaker boarding school in the Mendips that was set up in 1699 and continues to flourish today.

Emma Sturge is recorded in the local Bath Poor Rate books of 1853 at 2 The Bridge; (Pulteney, see **Fig.7, Point A**) the premises were described as an Anti-Slavery Depot in the *Bath Chronicle* for 6th April 1858. In 1859 she moved her Anti-Slavery Depot a few hundred yards to 5 Terrace Walk (currently occupied by the shop Independent Spirit). She had secured front-page advertising in the *Bath Chronicle* and continued to advertise weekly for many years. (See **fig.7, Point B**)

The term Depot refers to the metaphor that was coined to describe the underground railroad: a network of secret routes and safe houses used by escaped slaves to head for the northern 'free' states and to Canada, often aided by Quakers. It can be safely assumed that Emma was selling 'free labour' cottons, linens etc at her Depot.

All the Free Trade Cotton in the British market comes from the following countries; British India; Egypt; Natal, in South Africa; British West Indies; the United States with certificate, chiefly collected by the Free Trade Association of Philadelphia. From this raw material are manufactured, unbleached shirtings and sheeting; white calicoes, printed cambric's; printed Muslim's, plain chambrays, lusters, ginghams, dimities, checked muslins, rolled jacnet linings; hosiery; knitting and sewing cotton; etc <sup>3</sup>

By 1862 Emma Sturge appears in the *Bath Directory* as a haberdasher, still at Terrace Walk. She had dropped the Anti-Slavery Depot from her advertisements. Perhaps Emma's Depot stopped trading as a result of the United States embargo, of April 1861, on the export of cotton to Europe? This not only resulted in unemployment in the Lancashire mills but also meant that slave cotton was no longer available in the UK. By 1864-65 her daughter Ellen was sharing the same address managing a school for ladies. Emma finally became a member of the Society of Friends in 1868 and in time became an overseer of the Melksham meeting. She died in 1895 and is buried, with Ellen, in Melksham behind the old Meeting House.

Emma must have had considerable support from the shoppers of Bath to maintain 'Free Labour' outlets in the centre of the city for approximately six years. Another anti-slavery depot was housed in a warehouse at the rear of 14 Orange Grove, part of the Town Mill (see **Fig.9, Point E**). This appeared not to have been well supported, as there were only two advertisements in the newspapers. Louis Billington states that: 'The Bath Depot lacked capital and the free labour cotton goods were not considered suitable for that most fashionable city'.<sup>4</sup> This makes it even more remarkable that Emma maintained her Depot for so long.



fig 6: photo of Emma Sophia Sturge  
by Mrs H R Williams of Bath





fig 7: Photos of William and Ellen Craft

Mrs H.R. Williams, who was widowed by the age of 34, took the photograph of Emma Sophia Sturge. In 1851 she was living at 204 High Holborn in London, where she was a miniature painter. She moved to Bath and took up photography to support herself and her son Edward Henry. In the 1861 census she is listed as an Artiste and Photographer at 35 Milsom Street. The early pioneer of moving pictures, William Freise Greene (1855-1921) worked as her assistant in Bath.

## Americans in Bath

On 15th April 1852 Elihu Burritt (1810–79) gave a talk in Bath entitled Ocean Penny Postage. Burritt (the Learned Blacksmith) was an American who worked for temperance, abolition and for world peace. Abraham Lincoln later appointed him consul to Birmingham. He had a vision that cheap postage would allow greater communication across the world and this would promote greater understanding among mankind. Following a series of lecture tours

Burritt concentrated on anti-slavery work and became the mainspring of the British Free Produce movement. In 1853 Burritt met with Joseph Sturge and Mr and Mrs Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) to discuss the free produce movement and there seems to have been a possibility that in 1852 he met and maybe inspired Emma Sturge in her Depot enterprise.

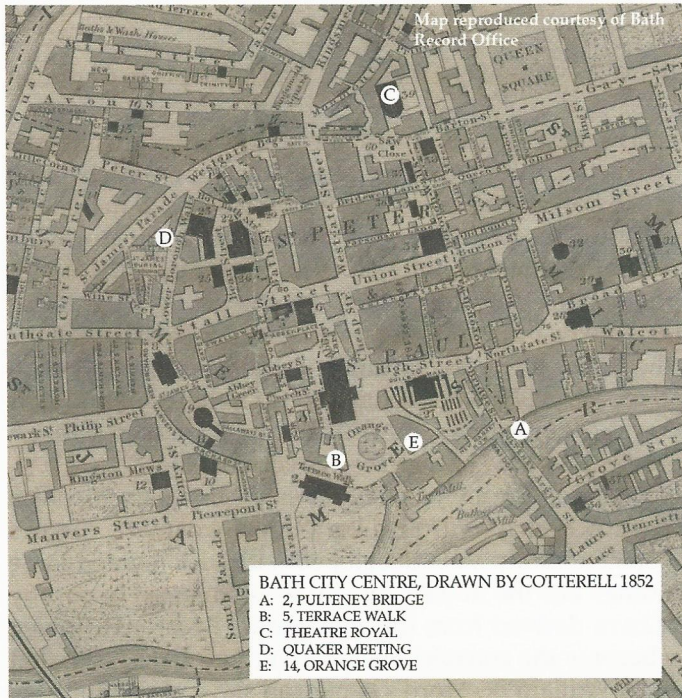


fig: 8: Bath City Centre, 1852.

Slaves William (1824-1900) and Ellen Craft (1826-91) escaped from Macon, Georgia in 1848. Ellen was very pale skinned so they hatched a plan for Ellen to dress as a man and pretend that William was her servant/slave. They boarded a train and travelled to Philadelphia and on to Boston. After the passing of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act they



were pursued by 'slave catchers' but finally escaped to England, where they stayed for nineteen years.

While in England they wrote and had published a book about their experience: *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. On 10th July 1856 the *Bath Gazette* reported: 'On Tuesday, a lecture was delivered to a numerous audience, at the Friend's Meeting House, Upper [Lower?] Borough Walls, (See **fig 7, Point D**) by Mr 'Craft, a fugitive slave, to whom, and his wife, Mrs Beecher Stowe refers as living witnesses of the truth of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*...'

## Conclusion

Bath residents demonstrated significant support for the anti-slavery movement. They invited prominent members of the anti-slavery movement into the city including William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, Hannah More, Joseph Sturge and President Lincoln's consul Elihu Burritt. Without doubt it was the Bath Quaker Meeting that gave enormous support to the Abolitionist movement. In particular the Sturge family had a significant influence on the movement to abolish the trading and keeping of slaves throughout the British colonies. Emma Sophia Sturge is notable in Bath for her establishment of anti-slavery depots.

The city was a significant centre for abolitionist activity, both before and after the passing of legislation despite some opposition from the authorities and a large number of Bath residents being slave owners.

## Appendix A

The following is quoted from a talk by Trevor Fawcett, entitled, 'Black people in Georgian Bath', in 2007.

'Early in 1792, Bath like other places was caught up in the great wave of national petitioning of Parliament. A public meeting in February agreed the text of a Bath petition that denounced what it called 'a traffick originating in the grossest injustice, and marked in every stage of its progress with cruelty and blood'. Bearing over a thousand signatures the document was eventually presented to Parliament by the M.P.s for Somerset, since Bath's own M.P.s were, like the City Corporation itself, decidedly unsympathetic. This particular campaign was unfortunately soon overtaken by events, as the ominous development of the French Revolution began to alarm the British government, and political pressure built up to stifle radical reform of any description. Yet Wilberforce continued to submit abolition Bills to Parliament almost every year from 1796 onwards until the successful passage through the two Houses in 1807 thanks to a brief interlude of non-Tory government.

'We know, though, that the Duke of Chandos, the architect John Wood's first patron, took a leading role in the Royal Africa Company, which controlled the shipment of many cargoes of slaves to the Caribbean. The Pulteney family, who developed Bathwick, owned large estates in America. Prestigious buildings like the Royal Crescent were financed in part by Bristol capital, which in turn must have derived from the slave trade. Beckford's Tower, built in the 1820s, would not have become the conspicuous landmark on Lansdown that it did without the wealth generated by William Beckford's American slave plantations.'



## Appendix B

The Abolition Timeline. Found at: [Royal Naval Museum.org](http://RoyalNavalMuseum.org)

- 1807 Great Britain passes the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act and levies fines on British captains importing slaves of up to £ 100 per slave.
- 1833 Abolition of Slave Act abolishes in all of Great Britain's colonies. Twenty million pounds is granted in compensation to slave holders. The act declares free all slaves under the age of six years. Former slaves must serve as apprentices for 4 years before being freed. William Wilberforce dies 3 days after the bill is passed in Parliament.
- 1851 Crimean war breaks out and the Royal Navy's strongest ships are withdrawn from both sides of the Atlantic, leading to an increase in the slave trade.
- 1852 Uncle Tom's Cabin published
- 1865 United States abolishes slavery at the end of the American civil war with the introduction of the 13th amendment. Abraham Lincoln pushed through the Bill
- 1888 Brazil is the last country to abolish slavery.

## Notes

1. Claire Midgely, *Women against Slavery, the British Campaign 1770-1780* (1995)
2. Peter Sturge, *An American Adventure*; [www.sturgefamilly.com](http://www.sturgefamilly.com)
3. Joelle Reiniger, *Moral Fibre: Women's Fashion and the Free Cotton Movement 1830-1860* (2013)
- 4 Louis Billington, 'British humanitarians and American cotton 1840-1860', *Journal of American Studies* Vol III no 3 1977.

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