

## **SLAVE TRADE, SLAVERY AND ABOLITION: THE NORTH EAST OF ENGLAND CONNECTIONS**

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### **Slave trade and slavery**

Think slavery and the slave trade. Think Bristol, Liverpool, Glasgow. That was the starting point for Remembering Slavery 2007. What about the north east of England? It faces east across the North Sea to Scandinavia and the Baltic. It was a coal based economy. Coal and ships. The main ports of call for centuries were London, Riga, Hamburg, Rotterdam, Le Havre. Coal out. Timber in. Simple. Simplified, of course. Many histories of the region have been written since the first accounts in the 18th century. Fleshed out and rich in detail, the stories have been told. Few have mentioned connection with places further afield except as brief notes. None have mentioned connections with the abominable trade, the plantation economies of the new world, or their produce.

The team of volunteers assembled last autumn by Sean Creighton largely arrived in the Remembering Slavery Archive Mapping and Research Project with modest expectations. Those expectations have been confounded by the abundance of evidence turned up by the archive search. Only the collections of the four project partners have been rigorously searched. Two other large collections, Durham County Record Office and Durham University's Special Collections, have only had their catalogues scanned. Big local studies collections in Newcastle, North Shields, Gateshead, South Shields, Sunderland, Carlisle and the whole of Teesside and North Yorkshire have hardly been touched. Close investigation of these would enormously augment the amount of material found.

The volume of material already available suggests, at least the possibility of, a reassessment of the north east's place in the emerging capitalist economy of the 17th to the early 19th centuries. Its relationship to the Atlantic world is the important part of that reassessment. This does not mean downgrading the well attested predominance of the links with the Baltic and northern Europe, but it does mean seeing these spheres as complementary.

### **A Sunderland connection**

Contact with the New World came in many forms not necessarily connected with slavery, at least in the first instance. The first recorded north easterner in America seems to have been William Hylton, a mariner and salter from the Sunderland district. Through connection with Sir Edwin Sandys, a counsellor of James I, he went to New England in 1621 as part of a rescue mission for the Mayflower settlers. William was said to be the first settler in what was to become New Hampshire. A number of County Durham place names in the area he settled suggest there may have been more north easterners attracted to that area. A relative, Anthony Hylton of South Shields, a master mariner, followed in 1623, taking settlers to Jamestown, Virginia. The Hyltons were sea farers who forged links with the Caribbean. Anthony Hylton acquired a tobacco plantation, was appointed Governor of St Kitts & Nevis in 1625 and later became a tobacco merchant selling on the London market. Hylton descendants settled in Maryland, Carolina and Jamaica before 1700. Like many of the first settlers, involvement in

the slave trade and slavery grew out of the acute labour shortages in their new lands. Members of several other north east families were early arrivals in America and the Caribbean, among them the Pinckneys of West Auckland, the Howards of Brampton and the Colvilles of Newcastle.

In the eighteenth century migration from the north east accelerated as opportunities in the New World increased. Members of reasonably well to do families could launch into business as planters and merchants. Edward Cook, of farming stock from Togston, near Alnwick, fulfilled both roles in Baltimore, Maryland from the 1730s. Military or naval activity was another route to the colonies. From the Cromwellian period onwards Britain was serially at war for control of the Atlantic. Soldiers could play two roles apart from fighting. They could send regular news bulletins home, as did Lord Percy during the War of American Independence, perhaps advertising the advantages of colonial life. They could seek land grants on retirement from the service like John Ogle of Eglington, Northumberland, or William Hedley of Rothbury, who married a Carolina woman. Additionally the poorer sorts could accept indenture, like William Moraley of Newcastle, with the hope of opportunity at the end of their time, whilst many who had fallen foul of the law might be transported as an alternative to the gallows.

### **Gentry capitalists**

During the eighteenth century many of the region's gentry acquired or increased colonial interests. Among the most significant were the Trevelyans of Wallington. Beginning with a marriage in 1757, by the time of abolition in 1833, the family had become major sugar producers in Grenada. The Cadogans were of similar importance on Barbados. By marriage to the Fenwicks they acquired Brinkburn Priory in the early 19th Century. The Riddleys, through the Freres, and the Ordes, Riddells and Hedleys all had plantation interests mostly in the Caribbean. Probably the biggest interest of all was that of the Graham Clarke family of Newcastle. They were linked by marriage to two old Jamaican planter families, the Barretts and Parkinsons. By 1820, the family had interests in at least thirteen plantations on that island.

Five Graham Clarke ships have been identified operating on the Atlantic trade taking Tyneside products (coal, glass, pottery and linen) to the New World and returning with slave produced goods, primarily sugar and rum, but also hard woods, pimento and indigo, right up to the 1830s. There were three extensive sugar refineries in Newcastle and Gateshead, two owned by Graham Clarke, and one in Stockton. The Crowleys, iron founders at Winlaton and Swalwell, supplied restraints for captured Africans and tools for the plantations from the late seventeenth century. Ralph Carr, the Newcastle merchant, engaged in the Atlantic trade from the Tyne in the 1720s. These were direct journeys carrying coal and iron goods and returning with timbers and pitch, but there was a more complex operation too. It involved stop-overs and transfers of commodities at London, Rotterdam, Bristol and the Cumbrian port of Whitehaven where family and business connections of Crowleys, Cooksons, Lowthers, Blacketts and others helped to create a web of transactions.

The north east was wholly integrated into the British Empire's political and commercial networks where the enslavement of Africans produced the super profits which, when combined with enclosure and agrarian capitalism at home, gave it a superior launching pad for the first industrial revolution. It is likely that

wealth generated in the Caribbean and in North America before independence funnelled into the north east of England. John Graham Clarke was the owner of plantations in Jamaica, the exporter and importer of sugar and rum to the Tyne, and a major shareholder in the Newcastle bank of Burdon and Surtees. The new district banks of the 18th Century were an important part of setting into motion the industrial economy. Yet more obviously, gentry families indulged in building, extending or renovating their great houses. Caribbean money was a vital ingredient in luxury consumption just as sugar was to become an object of mass consumption.

Many of the north east families connected with new world plantations maintained their interests up to the abolition of slavery in 1833 and beyond. The Parliamentary Act of 1833 ended strict slave status in the British Empire whilst granting substantial compensation to the slave owners for their loss of property. Claimants for compensation were required to register their holdings, including the number of slaves in order to claim appropriate compensation. The records of returns have survived. Two large claimants were the Graham Clarkes with five separate claims in Jamaica and the Trevelyans with four substantial claims in Grenada.

### **Towards abolition**

North east abolitionists were in the vanguard of the campaigns to abolish the slave trade and slavery. Notwithstanding the growing evidence of regional involvement in the economy of slavery it was not visible in the way it was in Bristol, Liverpool, Glasgow or London. There were few black people on the streets, very few domestic slaves, no hue and cry for escaped slaves and no holding prisons for absconded slaves. And there was no vociferous elite gaining its main income from it. It was probably therefore less obviously confrontational in the north east for abolitionists to raise their banner. It may explain, for example, why the truly conservative Common Council of Newcastle could pass a resolution in February 1788 calling for Parliament to conduct an urgent enquiry into the slave trade, and how Erasmus Blackett, a merchant and councillor with personal knowledge of the slavery business, could be called upon to convey the resolution to Parliament.

Newcastle's middle class, which contained both men with interests in slavery and abolitionists, was numerically small, and its members lived nearby each other in a very small geographical space. Discussion of the issues must have been immediate and insistent. The presence in the town of key abolitionist visitors like Thomas Clarkson and the former enslaved African, Olaudah Equiano, would have been obvious to all. It is just possible that an explanation for the sparse reference to slavery interests lies in the relative silence of those who had strong business interests in the colonies. The most involved figure, John Graham Clarke, had multiple local business interests and civic involvement which may have somewhat obscured the central role of colonial slavery in his business portfolio. Yet, it is hard to imagine his explanation for having six black children, as wards, in his household after 1794. We know they were placed there under the terms of a Jamaican associate's will.

### **Dissenting religion**

Presbyterianism in several sectarian varieties, Methodism, Unitarianism and Quakerism were all strong in the area. There was also a strain of Anglican evangelicalism. Dissenting religion played a major part in nurturing local

abolitionist sentiment. The Quakers were the first to express their opposition to slavery in the 1730s and then in an organised form in Newcastle in 1783, though John Wesley, a fierce opponent of slavery, regularly preached to his big congregations in the area. The Unitarian minister, William Turner, was an enthusiastic organiser of perhaps the first provincial organisation, the Newcastle Abolition Society founded in 1791. In that year it published 2,000 copies of a version of Thomas Clarkson's report to the House of Commons inquiring into the slave trade. The petition mounted by the campaign and lodged at the Guildhall accumulated over 3,000 signatures, possibly the largest provincial petition after Manchester's. Since the petition has not survived we cannot know the social status of its signatories, but the number represents about one in three of the town's adults, and we would be safe to presume they were almost exclusively male, from all classes, and with a high incidence of protestant dissenters.

This breadth of support probably accounted for the strength of the abolitionist cause in subsequent campaigning activity, at least after 1810. During 1806-7, when Parliament passed the bill abolishing the slave trade in the British Empire, although the Durham MP, Ralph Milbanke seconded the resolution, the north east appears to have played a lesser role in what was essentially a parliamentary campaign led by the government of the day. Further research might alter this assessment but, certainly, from 1810-1814, meetings were held in many towns in the region round the slave trading issues in the Peace Settlement at the end of the long war with France.

### **The push to 1833**

The 1820s was a decade of continuous agitation with the north east taking the lead in numerous meetings and petitions in every sizeable settlement and with heightened activity from both religious and secular organisations. The final drive to abolition in the British Empire took place between 1830 and 1833. There was a virtual pamphlet war, well represented in the Lit & Phil and Robinson Library's contemporary collections. The issue of slavery became entangled with the great reform bill crisis. The narrow voting base and patronage controlled system of Parliamentary representation had made it possible for West Indian planter lobbyists to become MPs like Anthony Storer at Morpeth, in the 1780s, and William Ewart Gladstone's father, John, in Berwick. Even after the franchise was widened in 1832, the Berwick MP, Matthew Forster used his position to campaign against British action to halt the slave trade.

Continued vigorous action was required from abolitionists in parliament. Earl Grey as Prime Minister and his son Lord Howick were important in this respect. At least as significant was the mushrooming growth of local societies across the region. Dozens of meetings were addressed by men like Charles Attwood, James Losh, Thomas Winterbottom and the Baptist missionary, William Knibb, visiting the area after his personal experience of the Jamaican rebellion.

It is difficult to assess the importance of the serial Caribbean slave rebellions on opinion in the north east but it is generally supposed that they impacted upon both the slave interest and abolitionists. The traffic in information from the Caribbean suggests they must have been well known in the area. In the final phases of colonial slavery the Graham Clarke letter books give regular and gloomy reports from the island, of the Jamaican Rebellion of 1831.

## Tyneside radicalism

Newcastle was a town with strong radical traditions established by the 1770s. There had been strong support for John Wilkes in the 1760s, for the American side in the war for independence and opposition to attempts to develop parts of the Town Moor. Abolition of slavery fitted well into this. Each of the campaigns and the 1792 petition were numerically substantial, indicating support beyond the radical 'middling sorts.' The enormous Newcastle mass meeting of 1819 in protest at Peterloo and the well of support for Queen Caroline in 1820 show the presence of a strong and socially diverse current of radicalism. However, in each of the campaigns the people whose names we know mostly belonged to the educated, well to do middle class. This was certainly true of the Quakers and Unitarians who formed the first committee. The institution which provided a focus for the campaigns was the Literary and Philosophical Society. The Lit & Phil was the successor of the more openly radical society founded in the 1770s. The fact that it was constituted in 1793, as war fever developed, certainly dampened the radicalism in its ranks, probably accounting for its constitutional forbidding of political discussion within its walls. Somehow objections to slavery seem to have transcended politics, for today we have to be grateful for the presence in the Library of numerous anti-slavery tracts and a wealth of informative literature acquired early in the Lit & Phil's life. In the 1820s and 30s men like William Turner, whose active history went back to the 1780s, and James Losh, active from 1810 till his death in 1833, continued to be mainstays of the local campaigns which were ultimately successful in abolishing slavery completely, at least in the British Empire.

## Post 1833

Success in 1833 did not bring an end to campaigns against slavery in the area. Minds and activity turned to the United States, Brazil and Cuba. In the 1830s women started to challenge the social convention that denied them direct involvement in a campaign that many had long supported. As the international campaign broadened women abolitionists became more and more prominent. Quaker women were especially significant, Anna and Ellen Richardson playing leading roles in organising a Free Labour Produce Campaign with many branches in the north east. They wrote anti-slavery missives and welcomed a succession of American abolitionists, including former slaves Frederick Douglas and William Wells Brown and the journalist, William Lloyd Garrison, to the north east up to and beyond the American Civil War. Also important was the journalism and pamphleteering of Harriet Martineau, partly resident in the area, on the national and international scene. The Radical MP for Newcastle, Joseph Cowen Jnr. organised support for the North and Emancipation during the American Civil War.

Black Africans, Americans and West Indians continued to visit, perform, and settle in the North East throughout the nineteenth century. Activists like Robert Spence Watson campaigned against the worst excesses of British rule in the colonies, colonial expansion, for black rights and against continued slavery around the world.

North east abolitionists were a vital part of the national abolitionist movement from its inception, growing in their influence as the nineteenth century proceeded. Their work was immensely important in helping to create a climate of public opinion which would embarrass those who gained from the foul trade and place pressure upon the politicians to enact legislation effecting change.

John Charlton, September 2007

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