

# Why was slavery abolished?

**M**OST of the changes you have so far studied in this book were brought about by the middle and upper classes. On pages 82–101 we are going to look at ways in which the working classes changed things.

You will remember how important the slave trade was to Britain from pages 42–44 and how cruel a system slavery was from pages 70–74.

In 1807 the slave trade was abolished by the British Parliament. It became illegal to buy and sell slaves, but people could still *own* them. In 1833 Parliament finally abolished slavery itself, both in Britain and throughout the British Empire.

Why, when the slave trade and the plantations in the West Indies seemed to be making so much money, were they abolished?

Sources 1 and 2 give two opinions.

## **SOURCE 1** The view of an English historian writing in 1869

“The crusade of England against slavery may be regarded as one of the most virtuous acts recorded in the history of nations.”

## **SOURCE 2** The view of a West Indian historian writing in 1938

“Those who see in the abolition of slavery the awakening conscience of mankind should spend a few minutes asking themselves why it is that man’s conscience, which has slept peacefully for so many centuries, should awake just at the time that men began to see the unprofitableness of slavery.”

1. Explain how the two historians in Sources 1 and 2 differ about why slavery was abolished.

Until recently most books have given the impression that the slaves were freed only because of white campaigners in England. But on pages 82–85 we are going to look at evidence which suggests that a range of factors may have been important.

Some historians say that:

- Black slaves, both in Britain and in the West Indies, were the ones who brought an end to slavery, because by running away and rebelling they made it impossible for slavery to continue.
- In practice most slaves had become free in Britain long before 1833.
- Slavery was abolished because it was no longer making a profit.

See what you think.

## **Factor 1:**

### **The white middle-class campaigners**

#### **Granville Sharp**

A chance meeting started one of the greatest campaigners against slavery on his work. As Sharp left his house one day in 1765 he noticed a black youth queueing for free medical help. His head was badly swollen, he was nearly blind and he could hardly walk. His name was Jonathan Strong and he told Sharp that he had been brought to Britain as a slave and had been beaten up by his owner, so he had run away.

Sharp took Jonathan Strong to a hospital, where he gradually recovered. Two years later he was healthy and working as a messenger boy. But one day his old master saw him, had him captured and sold him. Strong would be taken back to Jamaica as a slave. Granville Sharp took the case to court, where the Lord Mayor of London ruled: ‘The lad has not stolen anything, and is therefore at liberty to go away.’

Sharp had won this case. But what about all the other similar cases that the courts were waiting to hear? Sharp fought many of these cases on behalf of black people. He saved many of them from being sent back to the West Indies. Judges agreed that a master could not force a slave to go out of Britain. Sharp did not manage to get slavery or the slave trade abolished, but he had started the campaign against slavery.

Granville Sharp was also involved in other court cases, such as case of the slave ship *Zong* (see page 70). These cases were beginning to turn public opinion against slavery.

#### **William Wilberforce**

The campaign to abolish slavery was led by the Quakers, who believed that slavery was sinful and against Christian teachings.

In 1797 twelve opponents of slavery, including several Quakers, formed a group to fight for abolition. William Wilberforce is the best known of them. He was an MP and made many speeches in Parliament against the slave trade. Another member of the group, Thomas Clarkson, collected together all the information he could about the terrible conditions on the slave ships. He used this to persuade people of how awful the trade was. Huge petitions were collected and presented to Parliament.

Again and again the campaigners tried to get Parliament to abolish the slave trade. At last, in 1807, they were successful.





**SOURCE 3** Josiah Wedgwood, the owner of Britain's most famous potteries, made thousands of plaques like this. He even sent a shipload to the USA. The caption reads 'Am I not a man and a brother?'

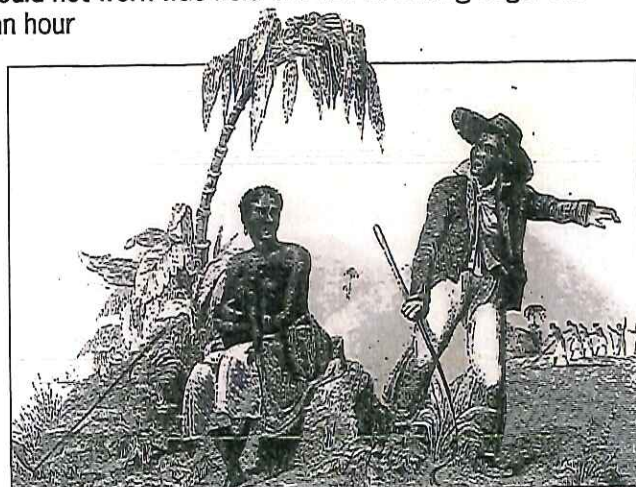


**SOURCE 6** An eighteenth-century cartoon referring to an incident when a sick slave who could not work was held in a tub of boiling sugar for three quarters of an hour

**SOURCE 4** Extracts from a speech by Prime Minister William Pitt in a debate in the House of Commons in 1792 about the abolition of the slave trade

“I know of no evil that ever has existed worse than the tearing of 70,000 or 80,000 persons annually from their native land. If we tempt the slave traders to sell their fellow creatures to us we may rest assured they will use every method – kidnapping, village breaking, bloodshed and misery – to supply their victims to us.

Think of 80,000 persons carried away out of their own country. Do you think nothing of their families which are left behind?



**SOURCE 7** From a print distributed in the late eighteenth century

1. Look at Sources 5–7. Explain which of these pictures were drawn to support the abolitionists and which to oppose them. Give reasons.

► **SOURCE 5** An eighteenth-century cartoon by James Gillray. The white man on the sofa is Wilberforce





## WHY WAS SLAVERY ABOLISHED?

### Factor 2:

#### The white working-class campaigners

In 1788 petitions began to flood into Parliament demanding the abolition of the slave trade. These petitions were from working-class people. In Manchester in 1788 over 10,000 working people signed a petition. Support grew: in 1792 over 20,000 Manchester people signed another petition (out of a population of 75,000). Huge meetings were held.

When the slave trade was abolished in 1807 these campaigns did not stop. They continued, with the aim of making slavery illegal and freeing all existing slaves. In 1814 one and a half million people signed petitions. In fact, more people signed these petitions than signed the famous CHARTIST petitions in the 1840s demanding reform of Parliament (see page 92).

1. Look at Sources 8 and 9. One was written by a rich nobleman in 1793 and the other is from a speech at a working-class meeting in Sheffield in 1794. Explain which is which.
2. Do the two sources agree about anything?

#### SOURCE 8

*“The idea of abolishing the slave trade is connected with the levelling system and the rights of man. And what is liberty and equality? Look at Haiti [where there had been a violent slave rebellion and the slaves had seized power] and see what the rights of man have done there.”*

#### SOURCE 9

*“Slavery is insulting to human nature. Its abolition will redeem the national honour, too long sullied by the trade of blood, and promote the cause of liberty. It will avenge peacefully ages of wrongs to our negro brothers.”*

### Factor 3:

#### Black people's actions

In the eighteenth century many black slaves in Britain began to demand to be treated like ordinary servants. They demanded wages. Many others simply refused to be kept as slaves and ran away. Often the slave's owner went to court to get the slave back, but the legal position of slavery in Britain was never clear. Everyone knew that slaves could be kept in other parts of the British Empire, such as the West Indies. Everyone also knew that slaves could be traded

around the world. But what happened if a slave was brought into Britain? There was no law that said slavery was legal in Britain and no law that said it was illegal. When cases of slaves claiming their freedom were brought to court in Britain the judges seemed to make a different decision every time!

Granville Sharp helped many of these slaves who were determined to remain free to fight their cases in the courts. Increasingly, the law courts did set them free. Soon it was not worth the trouble for slave owners to chase down their escaped slaves. By 1800 slaves were still being sold in Britain and being taken against their will to the West Indies, but most black people in Britain were free – through their own efforts.

#### SOURCE 10 A complaint about black slaves by a magistrate in 1768

*“They no sooner arrive here, than they put themselves on a footing with other servants, become intoxicated with liberty and begin to expect wages.”*

#### Olaudah Equiano

When he was just ten years old Olaudah Equiano was taken from Africa to Barbados as a slave. He worked as a servant to a ship's captain and so travelled widely. He stayed in London for some time, where he learned to read and became a Christian. He hoped he would be made free, but his master took him back to America and sold him. However, Equiano eventually bought his freedom and returned to England, where he married Susan Cullun from Ely.

In 1789 he wrote the story of his life. This was widely read and turned many people against slavery. He travelled the country speaking at meetings and worked closely with other ABOLITIONISTS like Granville Sharp. In fact it was Equiano who brought the case of the slave ship *Zong* to the public's attention. He died in 1797.

#### SOURCE 11

A portrait of Olaudah Equiano





### Slave revolt!

The ideals of equality and liberty that were behind the French Revolution in 1789 also took root in the island of St Domingue, a French colony in the West Indies. The plantation owners did not like these ideals, and to avoid another revolution like the one in France they planned an alliance with Britain. The slaves knew this would mean that slavery would continue. The conditions for the slaves on St Domingue were among the worst in the West Indies. The death rate among the slaves was very high because of the dreadful treatment they received.

In 1791 the slaves rebelled, murdering white plantation owners and setting fire to the sugar cane fields. British troops tried to take control, but the slaves, brilliantly led by a slave called Toussaint L'Ouverture, defeated the British as well as the French.

Slavery was abolished, and in 1804 the island declared itself independent with the new name of Haiti. All over the West Indies, plantation owners lived in terror of these ideas spreading to their own slaves. Meanwhile, people in Britain who were against abolition used Haiti as an example of what would happen if everyone was given equality (see Source 8).

1. Choose one or more of the three possible endings to this sentence:  
'The actions of black people ...'
  - had no effect on the debate about slavery'
  - helped to bring about the end of slavery'
  - made people worried about the effects of abolishing slavery'Explain your choice.

### Factor 4: Economics

From the 1770s onwards the West Indies were becoming less important to Britain. Cuba and Brazil could produce cheaper sugar. Many plantations in the West Indies were closed down. The demand for slaves fell. For example, in 1771 Barbados imported 2728 slaves, but in 1772 none were imported.

**SOURCE 12** Written by the poet and travel writer William Beckford in 1790 about the situation in the West Indies

“Without an importation of slaves the crops will decline, and the population and the produce will soon be extinct and at an end.”

**SOURCE 13** Written by the economist Adam Smith in 1776

“The experience of all ages and nations, I believe, demonstrates that the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any. A person who can acquire no property can have no other interest but to eat as much and to labour as little as possible. Whatever work he does can be squeezed out of him by violence only.”

The slave trade was abolished in 1807. It then took another 27 years to get slavery itself abolished. It was a gradual process. First, Parliament passed laws to improve conditions on the plantations. However, the laws had little effect, and in 1831 slaves in Jamaica went on strike and set fire to the cane fields. In response, the plantation owners shot 100 slaves and hanged 300. This made many people realise that conditions could never be improved, and in 1833 slavery was finally abolished.

1. Write down these four statements as headings in your book:
  - 'Slavery was abolished because of the actions of middle-class whites.'
  - 'Slavery was abolished because of the actions of working-class whites.'
  - 'Slavery was abolished because of the actions of blacks.'
  - 'Slavery was abolished because the whites realised it was not making any money.'Under each heading write down all the evidence you can find on pages 82–85 to support that view.
2. Write an essay entitled 'Why were the slave trade and slavery abolished?' At the end of your essay explain which you think was the most important reason.
3. Look back at your answers to the questions on page 75. Does the story of the abolition of slavery change your view about whether the British were racist?

### Activity

Work in pairs. One of you should design a poster campaigning against the slave trade. The other should design a poster campaigning against the principle of slavery itself.

Compare your posters. How are they different? How are they similar?