

HISTORICAL ENQUIRY

HOW TOLERANT WAS VICTORIAN BRITAIN?

In 1807, British Parliament did a remarkable thing and **abolished** the slave trade. This meant it was now illegal to buy and sell slaves – but people were still allowed to keep the ones they already had. In 1833, Parliament went further and completely abolished slavery itself – not only in Britain but throughout the Empire. The reason why this happened has been the cause of much debate among historians ever since. Who or what do they think caused Britain to turn its back on this terrible trade? What are the historians arguing about? And who do you think is right?

5: Why was slavery abolished?

MISSION OBJECTIVES

- To know when buying and selling slaves became illegal in Britain.
- To be able to decide what the main motivation for the abolition of the slave trade was.

Reason number 1: Cold, hard cash

The West Indies had been important to Britain because it produced sugar, which was in great demand and fetched high prices in Europe. From the 1770s onwards, Cuba and Brazil started to produce huge amounts of sugar, driving prices right down. Many plantations in the West Indies couldn't make a profit at these new prices and were closed down. If there were no plantations, there was no need for the slaves work on them. In 1771, Barbados imported 2728 slaves from Africa. The following year it imported none. With less people making enormous profits, there were less people to argue in favour of the slave trade. Also, people began to believe that slaves didn't work as hard as those who were paid for their labour, as the slaves had no **incentive**. They would be fed the same regardless of how hard they worked, whereas paid employees could improve their situations through their efforts at work.

'The work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance (food and shelter), is in the end the most expensive of any. A person who can gain no property can have no interest but to eat as much and to work as little as possible. Whatever work he does can be squeezed out of him by violence only.'

↪ **SOURCE A:** What the famous economist Adam Smith thought about slavery in 1776.

Reason number 2: The slaves strike back

Other people have argued that it was the actions of the slaves themselves that led to the end of slavery. In 1791, the slaves on St Dominique, a French colony in the Caribbean, rebelled, killed the white plantation owners and set fire to the sugar-cane fields. Led by the inspirational slave Toussaint L'Ouverture, they managed to keep control of the island despite attacks from both French and British soldiers. In 1804, the island was renamed Haiti, declared independent



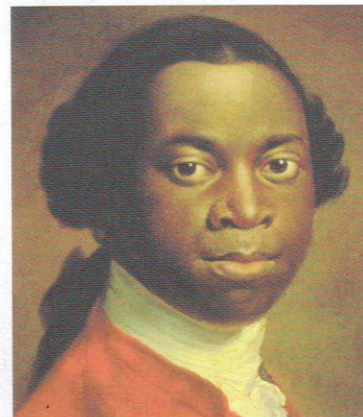
↪ **SOURCE B:** The slaves of St Dominique revolting against their French masters. St Dominique was soon renamed Haiti by the former slaves who took control of the island.

and outlawed slavery. Plantation owners throughout the West Indies were terrified that the rebellion would spread and their crops would soon be in flames. White slave owners had argued that Africans were inferior to Europeans and that their natural position was to be following orders and doing simple, manual work. What had happened in Haiti had proved to many people that this argument was wrong – and so did the actions of some African people in Britain.

Although there was no law saying that slavery was illegal in Britain, there was no law saying it was legal either. Many slaves that had been brought to Britain from Africa or the West Indies went to court to claim their freedom. More and more judges, impressed by the slaves' arguments, allowed them to go free.

The incredible Equiano

One former slave, Olaudah Equiano, campaigned tirelessly to convince British people that the slave trade was wrong. He had been taken from his home in Africa to Barbados when he was just ten years old. He worked as a servant to a ship's captain, travelled widely, and learned to read and write while staying in England. He was then taken to North America and sold once more but, through incredible hard work and patience, he bought his freedom and moved back to Britain, where he got married and wrote his life story. This was widely read and turned many people in Britain against slavery. The fact that he was clearly intelligent and articulate made a nonsense out of the claims that Africans were inferior and only good for manual work.



↪ **SOURCE C:** Equiano's tales of cruelty and inhumanity changed the attitudes of many people in Britain towards the slave trade.

Reason 3: Wilberforce

Some people believe that it was the actions of religious Europeans that led to the outlawing of slavery. Granville Sharp helped many former slaves in their court cases against their old masters and did much to help bring the injustice of slavery to the British public's attention. In 1797, a group of 12 devout Christian men, led by William Wilberforce, formed a group to fight for abolition. Wilberforce was an MP and made many speeches against slavery in Parliament. Another member of the group, Thomas Clarkson, collected together evidence of the horrors of the middle passage and the treatment that the slaves faced. The campaigners, who all believed that slavery went against the teachings of Christ, then used this evidence to collect huge petitions from the public.

WISE-UP Words

abolished
incentive

'The grand object of my parliamentary existence is the abolition of the slave trade. Before this great cause all others dwindle in my eyes. If it pleases God to honour me so far, may I be the instrument of stopping such a course of wickedness and cruelty as never before disgraced a Christian country.'

↪ **SOURCE D:** From a speech by William Wilberforce in 1789.

↪ **SOURCE E:** 200 000 of these seals were made and given away to try and convince people that slavery was evil and wrong.



Work

- Write a sentence explaining what the word 'abolish' means.
- What do you think was the most important factor in causing the abolition of slavery? Write a paragraph explaining why you think it is more important than the other two factors.
- Imagine you are a newspaper journalist in 1800. You work for one of the growing number of newspapers that are slowly turning against the idea of slavery. Your editor has asked you to compile a 'news exclusive' called 'SLAVERY – THE REAL STORY'.
 - Write one article about the slave trade itself – how does the 'slave triangle' operate?
 - Write one about conditions on board a slave ship – why do so many slaves die?
 - Write another about the sale of slaves and the work on the plantations – what work did slaves do and why were they punished so severely?
 - Also write about the campaign to end slavery – who are the key figures?
 - Include appropriate pictures and quotes.
- Do you think Victorian Britain was a tolerant place? Explain your answer carefully.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

- Can you tell someone how many years it has been since slavery was made illegal in Britain?
- Have you decided what caused the change in attitudes towards slavery in Britain?