

William Wilberforce

William Wilberforce, (born August 24, 1759, Hull, Yorkshire, England—died July 29, 1833, London), British politician and philanthropist who from 1787 was prominent in the struggle to abolish the slave trade and then to abolish slavery itself in British overseas possessions.



William Wilberforce

William Wilberforce, detail of an unfinished painting by Sir Thomas Lawrence, 1828; in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London

He studied at St. John's College at the University of Cambridge, where he became a close friend of the future prime minister William Pitt the Younger and was known as an amiable companion rather than an outstanding student. In 1780 both he and Pitt entered the House of Commons, and he soon began to support parliamentary reform and Roman Catholic political emancipation, acquiring a reputation for radicalism that later embarrassed him, especially during the French Revolution, when he was chosen an honorary citizen of France (September 1792). From 1815 he upheld the Corn Laws (tariffs on imported grain) and repressive measures

against working-class agitation.

Wilberforce's abolitionism was derived in part from evangelical Christianity, to which he was converted in 1784–85. His spiritual adviser became John Newton, a former slave trader who had repented and who had been the pastor at Wilberforce's church when he was a child. In 1787 Wilberforce helped to found a society for the "reformation of manners" called the Proclamation Society (to suppress the publication of obscenity) and the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade—the latter more commonly called the Anti-Slavery Society. He and his associates—Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, Henry Thornton, Charles Grant, Edward James Eliot, Zachary Macaulay, and James Stephen—were first called the Saints and afterward (from 1797) the Clapham Sect, of which Wilberforce was the acknowledged leader.

In the House of Commons, Wilberforce was an eloquent and indefatigable sponsor of antislavery legislation. In 1789 he introduced 12 resolutions against the slave trade and gave what many newspapers at the time considered among the most eloquent speeches ever delivered in the Commons. The resolutions were supported by Pitt (who was by then prime



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William Wilberforce, stipple engraving,
1814.

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minister), Charles Fox (often an opponent of Pitt's), and Edmund Burke, but they failed to be enacted into law, and instead the issue was postponed until the next session of Parliament. In 1791 he again brought a motion to the House of Commons to abolish the slave trade, but it was defeated 163 to 88. In 1792 Wilberforce, buttressed by the support of hundreds of thousands of British subjects who had signed petitions favouring the abolition of the slave trade, put forward another motion.

However, a compromise measure, supported by Home Secretary Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount Melville, that called for gradual abolition was agreed and passed the House of Commons, much to the disappointment of Wilberforce and his supporters. For the next 15 years, Wilberforce was able to achieve little progress toward ending the slave trade (in part because of the domestic preoccupation with the war against Napoleon). In 1807, however, he finally achieved success: on February 23 a bill to abolish the slave trade in the British West Indies was carried in the Commons 283 to 16, accompanied by a chorus of hurrahs for Wilberforce. It became law on March 25.

The 1807 statute did not, however, change the legal position of persons enslaved before its enactment, and so, after several years in which Wilberforce was concerned with other issues, he and Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton urged (from 1821) the immediate emancipation of all slaves. In 1823 he aided in organizing and became a vice president of the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions—again, more commonly called the Anti-Slavery Society. Turning over to Buxton the parliamentary leadership of the abolition movement, he retired from the House of Commons in 1825. On July 26, 1833, the Slavery Abolition Act was passed by the Commons (it became law the following month). Three days later Wilberforce died. He was interred at Westminster Abbey.

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