

EMANCIPATION

Enforcement of the trade's abolition

After 1807 British anti-slavery entered a new phase. The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which had largely orchestrated the early abolitionist movement, gave way to the African Institution, whose principal aim was to ensure that the new legislation was enforced and that other countries followed Britain's example.

Thanks to the efforts of the Royal Navy, the first of these objectives was soon realised. Supplementary legislation also reinforced Britain's ongoing commitment to abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. Persuading other countries to join Britain in outlawing the slave trade proved much more difficult.

Slave registration

Suppression of the slave trade, and in particular efforts to suppress the illegal traffic between the West Indian colonies, led to the introduction of slave registration. By 1817 most of the British West Indian colonies had a system of public registration, which required regular reports of any changes in slave holdings, whether through births, deaths, purchases or sales. Provision was also made for a central registry in London.

First moves towards emancipation

There was little evidence to suggest that suppression of the transatlantic slave trade had done much to improve the treatment and condition of colonial slaves. In 1823 some of the leading members of the African Institution, among them Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, and Zachary Macaulay, organised a new body, the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Dominions, known as the Anti-Slavery Society. It called for the adoption of measures to improve slave conditions in the British West Indies, together with a plan for gradual emancipation that would lead ultimately to complete freedom.

The Anti-Slavery Society was a national organisation. Large numbers of women were also involved in the movement. It is estimated that at least 70 women's associations were active between 1825 and 1833.

Between 1828 and 1833, when slavery was finally abolished in the British West Indies, Parliament was deluged by over 5,000 petitions against colonial slavery organised by the Anti-Slavery Society and signed by one and a half million Britons. The national female petition of 1833 contained 187,157 signatures, making it the largest single anti-slavery petition ever to be presented to Parliament.

This kind of popular pressure had an effect. In 1823 George Canning, as foreign secretary, introduced a series of resolutions calling for the 'amelioration' of the condition of the slave population in his majesty's colonies. These were followed in 1824 by an Order in Council for improving the condition of slaves in Trinidad and later other Crown colonies. The order made provision for a number of important reforms:

- encouragement of formal marriage

- abolition of the use of the whip in the fields
- greater attention to religious instruction
- right of slaves to purchase their own freedom
- appointment of an independent slave 'protector', whose job it was to provide official returns of births, deaths, marriages, punishments, and manumissions. I

It was hoped other colonies would follow Trinidad's example and take it upon themselves to revise their slave codes but progress was slow.

Part of the problem was that while many planters supported amelioration, most were opposed to anything that they thought would threaten either their property or basic authority. Many planters were quick to make the link between amelioration and growing unrest among Britain's slave populations.

Slave rebellions

The period after abolition of the trade witnessed a series of large-scale slave uprisings, most notably:

- 1816 Barbados Revolution, sometimes referred to as Bussa's Rebellion or the Easter Rebellion
- 1823 rebellion in Demerara, led by Jack Gladstone
- 1831-1832 Christmas Rebellion in Jamaica, led by Sam Sharpe, which involved over 20,000 slaves and is said to have caused more than one million pounds in damage.

These rebellions, were met by reprisals from White planters (500 Blacks were killed in the wake of the Christmas Rebellion in Jamaica, for instance), which gave the abolitionist movement at home fresh momentum, while at the same time undermining the government's settled policy of proceeding cautiously with its West Indian colonies.

Increasing pressure for abolition of slavery

By 1830 it was clear that the Government's policies were not working. In 1831 some of the Anti-Slavery Society's more radical elements formed the Agency Committee and committed to a much more radical and far-reaching agenda, namely the *immediate* and *unconditional* abolition of slavery. The first reformed Parliament after 1832 was sympathetic to emancipation. In May 1833 Lord Stanley presented a plan to Parliament, which finally passed into law on 29 August.

The 1833 act provided for the gradual abolition of slavery in the British West Indies. Under its terms, everyone over the age of six on 1 August 1834, when the law went into effect, was required to serve an apprenticeship of between four and six years, except in Antigua or the Bahamas, which both passed local legislation abolishing apprenticeship. The new legislation awarded colonial planters twenty million pounds in compensation.

Opposition to apprenticeship

Abolitionists were disappointed with the gradual approach to emancipation. They therefore exposed what they saw as failings of the apprenticeship system and succeeded in bringing an early end to apprenticeship. Between May and August 1838

all of the colonies passed legislation ending apprenticeship on 1 August 1838 (which is why this date and not 1834 is traditionally recognised in the British Caribbean as the anniversary of the ending of slavery).