

The Power of the People - Petitions & Persuasion

Am I Not a Man and a Brother?

The renowned potter Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) worked alongside William Dillwyn and Thomas Clarkson to form the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787. He designed a seal which became the iconic image of the Abolition campaign. It showed an enslaved African in chains, kneeling, his hands lifted to heaven. The motto read: "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?"

Wedgwood reproduced the design in a cameo with the black figure against a white background. Hundreds of cameos and medallions were donated for distribution. The image became widely reproduced on domestic objects like crockery. It became popular with women who wore it on hair pins, purses and other fashion accessories.

The image, however, shows a docile and supplicatory enslaved African. This was far from the truth. It reflected nothing of the frequent and fierce rebellions of the enslaved people in the New World plantations. Nonetheless this image helped publicise support for the cause.

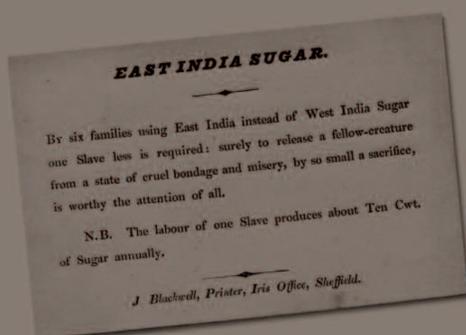


Influencing Public Opinion

The Abolition Movement had struck a chord in the public's imagination through their different strategies. The Quakers were amongst the first of many to petition Parliament – in fact it was a subject that produced the greatest number of petitions. With public meetings, debates and mass letter writing - all helped to sway public opinion about the iniquities of the slave trade.

The voice of the people was picked up by politicians. The Abolitionist MP William Wilberforce spoke in Parliament from 1789 to appeal for the Abolition cause. Within two years he brought the first Abolition Bill in 1791. It was not voted in. A year later the House of Commons changed their minds. But it went no further as the House of Lords rejected the Bill.

Women and the Sugar Boycott



A radical protest was organised in response to the rejection of the Abolition Bill. The Quakers led the country in the boycotting of slave-produced goods. With women forming a large section of the Anti-Slavery campaign groups, the boycott took hold. More than 300,000 people from working and middle class families were encouraged by the appeals to women to stop buying slave-produced sugar or wearing clothes with slave-grown cotton. Many stopped buying sugar altogether. Others chose Indian-grown sugar instead.

Alongside the Tottenham author Priscilla Wakefield, some women wrote poetry to publicise the campaign. Their work often focused on the subject of an enslaved mother and her predicament - maltreated and separated from her children. This was an image repeatedly emphasised by women campaigners.

The vital role women played in the fight to abolish the slave trade and slavery can not be underestimated – even though women did not even have the right to vote.