

The 200th Anniversary of the Slave Trade Abolition Act: a North London perspective

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This article is the text of a speech made at a commemorative dinner organised by the London Borough of Haringey at Broadwater Farm Community Centre, Tottenham on July 30th.

I want to talk this evening about how the British Transatlantic Slave Trade touched the lives of those living in the parishes of Hornsey and Tottenham. I want to talk about people being treated as property within these parish boundaries. I want you to consider what it might feel like to be a piece of property and then what it does to the mind of an owner. I want you to consider that before Africans were forcibly brought to Britain, or across the Atlantic, there was in Africa a long history of kings and queens and great kingdoms going back to the days of the Egyptians.

I *could* talk about the factors involved in the ending of the Slave Trade, as we are gathered together to commemorate this event. That, however, is a contentious issue. Marika Sherwood, in her recently published book *After Abolition* found copious documents in national archives showing that the Slave Trade was not checked by the 1807 Act. The legislation was not as effective as has apparently been claimed. There was little effort to enforce the new law. Parliament was under pressure by Abolitionists to pass further Acts to try and stamp out the trade. None was fully effective. As late as 1860, a ship, *The Nightingale*, equipped for the Slave Trade, sailed unchecked by Customs, out of Liverpool. So much for the honesty of British historians who allowed such a myth to become an accepted historical fact!

I *could* talk, on this occasion, about some of the Anti-Slavery activists in Tottenham. There were many local people, particularly among the Quakers, who had the new liberal ideas of the Enlightenment, and who recognised the humanity in all people.

William Dillwyn (1743-1824), was an American Quaker (sent to London by the American Anti-Slavery campaigner Benezet) who joined the Tottenham Meeting House in 1777 (being subsequently buried in the grounds). He was a member of the first London Abolition Committee in 1787 and continued to be active in the Anti-Slavery Movement for the rest of his life.

Priscilla Wakefield (1750-1832) was a Quaker writer of children's science and geography books, living on Tottenham Green, who stopped buying slave cotton and slave sugar – alongside many other women all over Britain who joined in the Anti-Slavery Movement's boycott. The Anti-Slavery Movement was the first national campaign in which women played an active if subsidiary role.

John Eardley-Wilmot (1749-1815) lived for ten years in Bruce Castle (the manor house of the parish of Tottenham) from 1804. An MP, Eardley-Wilmot chaired a Parliamentary Committee set up to give compensation to Loyalists from the American War of Independence (that is Americans who fought on the side of the British). Enslaved Americans had been promised their freedom at the beginning of the War if they fled the plantations and came to fight with the British. Thousands did. Eardley-Wilmot kept that promise but Black Loyalists were largely refused any further financial recompense.

Eardley-Wilmot, senior, (1709-1792) had been Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas and had passed a judgement in favour of John Hylas, a free black man, in 1768. The wife of Hylas, Mary, was enslaved and had been sold back to the Plantations. Hylas claimed, with the help of Granville Sharp, that his rights as a husband were legally more powerful than the rights of Mary's owners. Hylas won his case but gained an unusually small sum of money in

compensation. We do not know if Mary Hylas made the journey back to London.

Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797) was an African who played a very active part in the Anti-Slavery Movement. He wrote and published his best-selling autobiography and travelled the length and breadth of the country to speak on the cause. We don't know if he spoke in Tottenham, but we know that he would have travelled along Tottenham High Road to court his soon-to-be wife who lived in Soham, Cambridgeshire.

These local people contributed towards the end of the Slave Trade in their individual ways and they believed that owning people as property was wrong. There were, inevitably, local people, both African and white, who would have joined the Anti-Slavery Movement but whose names go unrecorded.

In 1807 the whole of Middlesex was represented by only two members of Parliament. The two Members were George Byng of Wrotham Park, Potters Bar (a Whig), and William Mellish, of Bush Hill Park, Enfield (a Tory). Byng was a friend of Charles James Fox, a Whig and an Abolitionist, so we may assume that George Byng voted for the end of the Slave Trade. William Mellish had connections in the City of London and was a Tory, so we may equally assume that he voted against the Bill. The records of how the votes were cast in Parliament all went up in flames when there was a fire in Parliament on 16th October 1834.

But I *really want to tell you* about how so many aspects of eighteenth century life were inextricably involved in the business and profits of the Slave Trade. How else could there slaves in Britain despite our Common Law right of habeas corpus?

The Media, with newspaper articles, television and radio programmes, made quite a splash round the bicentenary date of March 25th. The focus seemed to be on the Triangular Trade and the Anti-Slavery Movement. There were programmes about the Middle Passage, the man, Newton, who wrote *Amazing Grace*, and about Wilberforce who was the Parliamentary figurehead of this first national mass movement.

But I did not really feel anyone had truly grasped or conveyed that enslaved Africans lived here in considerable numbers over the centuries. Neither had they grasped that African people were in the Movement themselves.

So I want to talk about the African people who were part of Hornsey and Tottenham history.

But yet again to put that in a further context, over 25 years ago Chris Power was appointed Haringey's MultiCultural Adviser and he had set up the MultiCultural Curriculum Support Group. Chris Power and his colleague Nigel File had just published '*Black Settlers in Britain 1555-1958*', a school book based on using documentary evidence to prove the continuous Black Presence in Britain. When I joined the group, I was asked to work on similar themes for Haringey. Hence the book '*Connections – Haringey Local-National-World Links*' was published by Haringey Community Information Service, 1986.

The results of considerable research in such archives as the Public Record Office, the School of Oriental and African Studies Library, the India Office Library, what is now the London Metropolitan Archives, and the Archives held here at Bruce Castle, to name a few, made the previous view of local history, centring mainly on the lives of white males, redundant and untruthful. The message within '*Connections*' was, and is, that everyone who has lived, if only for a day, in Hornsey and Tottenham is part of those parishes' histories. Everyone who came here became part of the history and brought their histories with them. Everyone who travelled out was part of Haringey's history. Nobody is excluded.

What is pertinent about that idea is that it tackles the issue of the omissions made by historians. Who has been left out of the national story in the past? For example, everyone knows that Wilberforce introduced the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Strangely few have heard of Granville Sharp (1735-1813) who made it his life's work to give enslaved Africans the protection of habeas corpus. This meant and still means that everyone in Britain has a right to be charged for their offence, tried in court and

able to have a defence. He believed that in Common Law no Man could be owned by another. He helped organise the defence of the enslaved in the courts which led to a series of legal judgements that limited the powers of slave-owners. Thomas Clarkson, who laboured unswervingly for Abolition, has also got little recognition.

By embracing this all-inclusive idea of history, and, by recognising the dynamics within local-national-world links, we can firmly place, for example, African, Russian, French, Japanese, Greek and Irish people who came to Hornsey and Tottenham as being part of local history.

By changing how we look at history, by seeing everyone as having a part in it, we can bring into the local story a free Barbadian woman, Ruth Thomas, who died in 1745. She was a house keeper in Edmonton to a Mr Knight but also renting a room, full of an amazing number of personal possessions, in the parish of St Edmund the King. She would have walked along Tottenham High Road to get to her room in London. We can bring in the first Russian diplomat in 1557, met at Tottenham High Cross and led into the city by members of the Russia Company to the court of Queen Mary. We can bring in a Japanese-English boy, whose father, William Eaton, was on the first East India Company ship to Japan in 1612. We can include Mary Chauvet, a Huguenot refugee in 1759, living in White Hart Lane. We can include the Greek orphan boys brought from Greece by the Quakers in 1827. We can admire the business acumen of the market gardener, Michael Rochford, an Irishman from County Clare, who grew pineapples and grapes under glass for a mass market in the late Victorian period. So many people have the right to be in the local story. Many had national and world significance. They, and many others, are all in the book, *'Connections'*, which, I believe, Haringey Council is about to reprint.

Let me explain what I mean by local-national-world links. This is a quote from a Parish Register. *'William Jenkins, a negro, aged 21 years, was baptised in this church (St Mary's, Hornsey) upon the 11th day of July 1764.'* We know nothing further about this young man ...

but his existence *is* recognised in the Parish Registers. He has a name at least. Was he a piece of property as he walked the path through the graveyard up to the church for the ceremony? If he was a piece of property, then whose property? We don't know. Here was the *local* link. He was here.

What is the *national* significance of William Jenkins? Free or enslaved he was the physical embodiment of a national engagement in the Slave Trade. He was the physical embodiment of Whig governments' foreign and economic policies.

What is the *world* significance of William Jenkins? We can't be sure of that. Was he part of Nigerian or Ghanaian history? Had he travelled from Africa to the Caribbean and was therefore also part of Jamaican or Barbadian history? William Jenkins came, like others, with his own history.

In the eighteenth century, Hornsey, Tottenham, Enfield, Edmonton and Cheshunt were very small places with small populations. At the beginning of the 1700s there were possibly as few as 1,000 people in each parish. They were rural parishes.

Fields stretched where today there is nothing but houses. People would meet in the High Road, in the lanes, in the streets, in shops, at the market or by the water pump on Tottenham Green. The African people who lived here were highly visible in such small populations.

The Parish Registers of Hornsey, Tottenham, Enfield, Edmonton and Cheshunt show just over 40 people of African descent being recorded. That does not mean that that was the total number. Many would not be recorded. Many more would have travelled along Tottenham High Road, (then part of the great very busy road north out of London) to Cambridge and Lincoln and beyond. We know practically nothing about these people's lives.

As more and more searches are made, all over Britain, in the Parish Registers, more and more evidence is being revealed of the African presence. Tottenham and Hornsey people, as

well as people in other parishes across the country, knew they had the consequences of slavery in their midst.

Now to the nub of the matter. How did the Slave Trade touch the lives of the people of Hornsey and Tottenham?

Already by the 1750s there was hardly a corner of the UK which had no contact with the African and West Indian Trade

There were slave owners in Tottenham and Hornsey. Some of them took their slaves to the Church for baptism or burial. We know that Lord Henry Hare, occupant at Bruce Castle, owned an enslaved African boy because he appeared in a painting with Hare's two sons in 1680. You can see that painting in Bruce Castle Museum. Perhaps Lord Hare and other slave-owners went into London and bought their Africans in a coffee shop or a public house auction. What about that other question? What happens to the mind and humanity of a person who owns another? How did Lord Hare feel about this young man he owned?

Some local people would actually own or part-own plantations in the Caribbean. They would have lived well on the profits of slave labour. A great deal of research would be needed to identify individuals.

Some people would have invested money in the Slave Trade and also enjoyed the profits that accrued. We don't know who these people were at present (unless research is done into wills and legal cases) but all across the country people invested in ships that were sailing for Africa. They also invested in slave-related industries, such as chain-making or gun-making. A number of such investors must have come from Tottenham and Hornsey. The profits from these investments were put into houses, estates, gardens, businesses, agricultural improvements and industrial ventures. Surely every Palladian house in the hands of the National Trust was built with the profits of the Slave Trade?

Everyone in Hornsey and Tottenham benefited from the British Mercantile Empire and colonial expansion in the eighteenth century. Obviously

the Poor benefited much less than other sections of society. More prosperous people drank tea from China or coffee from the Middle East out of cups and saucers brought from China; they bought new foreign plants for their gardens found by globetrotting plant-gatherers, (Townshend, a Whig sympathiser, was the occupant of Bruce Castle in the late eighteenth century and had a big collection of fashionable auriculas). People bought furniture made from Scandinavian, Caribbean or Indian wood for their homes. Above all, they had sugar, tobacco, cotton and rum from the Caribbean and American plantations.

In fact, the buying and selling of such luxuries was based on the profits from Plantation labour. Slaves were worked much harder in the Caribbean than in America. They were worked to death. So a truly terrible price was paid in human misery.

We do not know much about the lives of the enslaved Africans in Britain. They must have had hard lives. They had no rights in law. They could be bought and sold in the open market. They could be physically and sexually abused. A free man could be enslaved, kidnapped on the streets, at anytime. A slave-owner would not be accused of murder if he beat a slave to death. The ship-owners of 'The Zong' won a court case against an insurance company for loss of property at sea after the sea captain had thrown 132 Africans overboard in 1782. There was no accusation of murder.

We know that many Africans resisted their conditions by running away. If you were to visit The Newspaper Library at Colindale, you would find many advertisements in contemporary newspapers for the return of runaway slaves. From the British Apollo, 13 February 1708:

Run away from his Master on the 2nd Instant, David Marat, a Black, about seventeen years of age, with short woolly hair; he had on a whitish cloth livery, lined with blue, and princes-metal buttons, with a turban on his head: he sounds a trumpet, whoever secures him and brings him to Edward Talbot Esq; by King Street near Soho, shall have five guineas reward.

Or on the same page:

Run away from his Master on the 14th instant, one Tho. Jones, about 24 years of age, with pock-holes in his face, a dark brown wig, in a grey cloathe livery lin'd with black, Stammers a little in his speech, whoever brings him to Mr. Dikes, by the Horseshoee Tavern, in Drury-lane, shall have two guineas reward.

As we commemorate tonight the Act which was passed to abolish the Transatlantic Slave Trade I want to end by asking everyone, who is able, to stand up while the names of those African people who appear in the Tottenham and Hornsey Parish records are read out. There are 15 names. Only one was a woman because female Africans were brought into Britain in much smaller numbers.

Remember the quotations I will read out are taken word for word from the Parish Registers. We wouldn't choose to use these words today because they are associated with slavery, but it is from these local records that the history of Africans in Hornsey and Tottenham can be reclaimed. Remember these words were written by the Parish Clerk, in a backroom of the church, with his quill pen and inkpot on that very day. The words are his words.

These entries in the parish registers are poignant with the sadness and sorrow of enslavement, or the hard life of free African people among the labouring Poor. Two of the Africans are given no names although the names of their owners were recorded.

When the list is completed, I would also ask you to stand in silence for one minute, out of respect. Some of these people might have been free but it is more likely they were here as products of the Transatlantic Slave Trade which at its core was about the ownership, profit and use of people as property.

We remember '*Henry and Willm, two negro's of Sir Thomas Rowes, baptized in the church second day,*' 1692, St James, Clerkenwell Detached, Muswell Hill.

We remember '*Walter Anberey, the son of Nosser Anberey borne in the kingdom of Dungala in Africa and baptised upon the third day of February....in the eighth year of King James anno 1610*'. All Hallows Church, Tottenham.

We remember '*John Cyras, Captain Madden's black*', baptised March 1718, All Hallows Church, Tottenham.

We remember '*A Black from Mr Bakers at Stroud Green*', buried 24th July 1725 at St Mary's Church, Hornsey.

We remember '*John Moore, a black from Captain Boulton's*', buried 8th October 1725 at St Mary's Church, Hornsey.

We remember '*Julius Caesar, a black*', buried 19th August 1733 at All Hallows Church, Tottenham.

We remember '*Captain Lissles black from Highgate*' buried 1733 at St Mary's Church, Hornsey.

We remember '*John Christian, a black*', buried 1740 at All Hallows Church, Tottenham.

We remember '*Sarah Claret, wife of Robert, a negro*', buried 6th April 1760 at All Hallows Church, Tottenham.

We remember '*Robert Claret, a negro aged 65*', buried 27th March 1762 at All Hallows Church, Tottenham.

We remember '*John Hill, son of John and Mary, a negro aged 14*', buried 21st August 1762 at All Hallows Church, Tottenham.

We remember '*William Jenkins, a negro, aged 21 years, was baptised in this Church upon the 11th day of July 1764*', St Mary's Church, Hornsey.

We remember '*John Hill, a black aged about 78 years*', buried 4th July 1771 at All Hallows Church, Tottenham.

We remember '*Henry Johnson, a negro lad aged about 16 years*', baptised 25th October 1801 at All Hallows Church, Tottenham.

There follows a minute's silence.

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