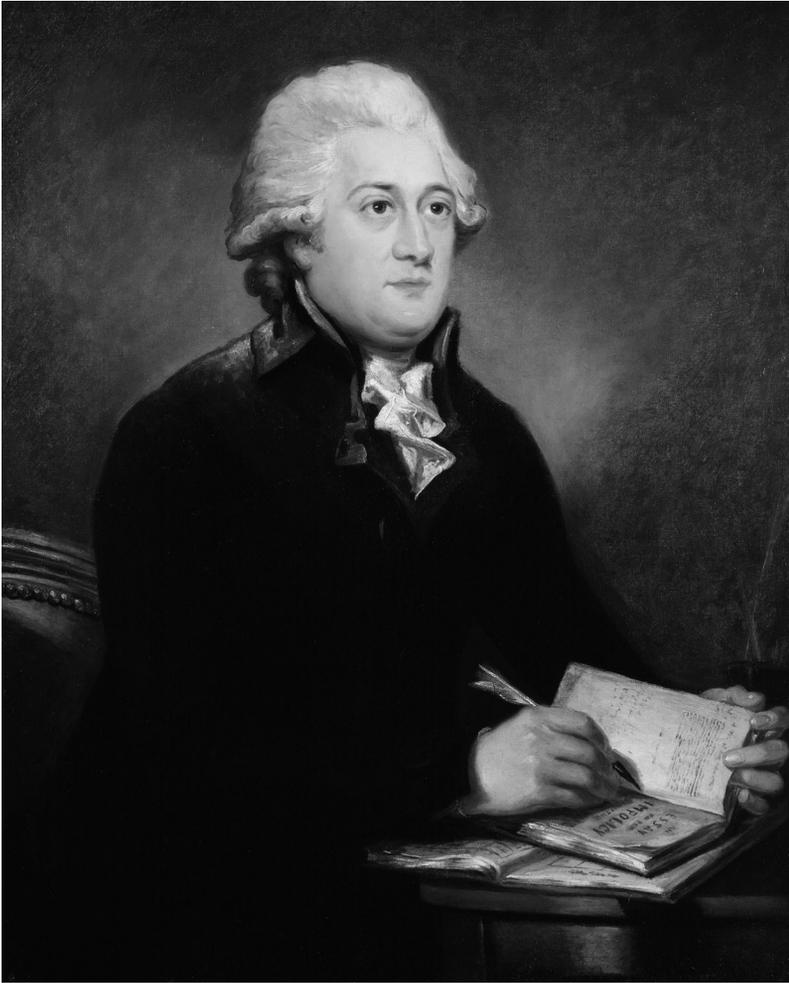


KENT AND THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE: A COUNTY STUDY, 1760s-1807

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Two thousand and seven marks the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade. This brutal 'human traffick' that carried men, women and children from west Africa across the Atlantic to enslavement in the Americas, by 1750 was dominated by British shipping. Most slaves carried in British ships went to the Caribbean islands where they were mainly employed as forced plantation labour. By the mid-eighteenth century the Caribbean islands had become Britain's imperial jewels; the sugar, rum, molasses, cotton, and other slave-produced goods were seen as vital mainstays of the domestic economy. Although the transportation of white convicts to the American colonies, a system akin to temporary enslavement, continued to the 1770s, the view had arisen that white people should not be enslaved but that black people could. Great outrage was expressed at the enslavement of Europeans as captives in the north African Muslim states, and many parishes, including those in Kent, raised contributions for their redemption.¹ Before mid-century only a few isolated Europeans questioned the morality of shipping African slaves in murderous conditions across the Atlantic. However, thereafter disquiet steadily increased in both Britain and North America at this growing trade which, in the 1760s-70s saw 1.3 million people shipped to the New World colonies, with the resulting deaths of thousands more. The reasons for this slow change in attitudes, and from anti-slavery to abolitionism, are predictably complex. They reflected economic and social changes brought about by increasing industrialisation and urbanisation, the influence of the evangelical awakening on both sides of the Atlantic, Enlightenment ideas about the employment of labour, and political changes brought by the revolutionary situation in the North American colonies that changed perceptions of Empire and commerce.²

Demands to end the slave trade gained pace in Britain in the 1770s. By the late 1780s and early 1790s this had developed into an extra-parliamentary campaign that influenced legislators to pass a series of regulatory measures and then culminated in an Act abolishing the slave trade in March 1807. This extra-parliamentary campaign was organised



Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), the lifelong campaigner against the slave trade and then slavery, an oil painting by Carl Frederik von Breda, 1788. (Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, London)

from London by the Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, created in May 1787. Its leaders were a group of Quakers and a few evangelical Christians who set about organising public opposition, using methods that became standard for future similar lobbies: publishing

pamphlets and books, public meetings, gathering subscribers, creating local branches, lobbying MPs, organising petitions to Parliament and distributing a medallion, produced by Josiah Wedgwood, showing the figure of a kneeling African beneath the caption: 'Am I not a man and a brother?'. Later was added a campaign to promote a popular boycott of slave-produced sugar and other goods. Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), an Anglican deacon, visited the relevant ports around the country on behalf of the Committee collecting data on the slave trade, often at considerable personal risk. Within parliament the campaign was led by another evangelical, William Wilberforce, the MP for Hull.

The organisational direction of the anti-slave trade lobby came from the Committee in London. The bulk of the support for abolition came from northern manufacturing towns. There was relatively little publicly organised anti-slave trade sentiment in the south east counties, including Kent, although few historians have attempted to investigate this. Local studies of both pro- and anti-slave trade activities are useful in that they provide a more balanced account of a major change that occurred in Britain's foreign commerce.³ Of course, the county may not necessarily provide the most sensible or logical unit for study, but local studies have to begin somewhere and to have limits. The County of Kent seems, at least at this stage of research, to provide a useful and containable area in which to investigate how the abolitionists organised their campaign and how those who opposed change responded.

Kent and the slave trade: traders, merchants, and planters

Eighteenth-century Kent was a maritime county with a long seaboard cut by the river Medway, a number of small but strategically significant ports, a substantial shipbuilding industry both naval and mercantile, and proximity to London which was the major overseas trading city dependent on the Thames. Certain Channel and Thames-side ports were strategically placed to furnish ships bound for the Atlantic trade with stores, sailors, and the vital services required for commercial shipping. London undoubtedly exerted considerable influence on Kent's coastal and Thames-side towns and ports, invariably tying certain of their fortunes to those of the metropolis. Deptford and particularly Gravesend fed off their maritime closeness to London, the latter often being a port of call for ships departing or returning from the blue water trade. Until the mid eighteenth century London was the most active slave port followed by Bristol and then Liverpool. It had held the headquarters of the Royal African Company, which from 1672 to 1689 had a monopoly of the west African trade. From 1760 onwards, London was second to Liverpool, and ahead of Bristol, in the number of ships despatched to west Africa and in the number of slaves carried to the Americas. From 1698-

1807, London ships carried over 717,000 slaves to the Americas, and although the pattern of its trade with west Africa became irregular after 1760, nevertheless the city remained Britain's second slaving port until abolition in 1807.⁴ This trade to west Africa and the Americas impinged on Kent. Seamen, enlisted and impressed, from the county helped to man these ships. Vessels constructed in Kent yards, for example, the schooner *Peggy*, and the clinker built *Comet*, both built at Folkestone in 1783 and 1787, and the *Queen Esther*, a 'West Indian ship' built at Gravesend in 1789, were engaged either directly in the slave trade or in shipping slave-produced goods from West Indian to British ports.

Of all Kentish towns, Deal perhaps had most direct involvement in the slave trade. It was a 'head port' of London with a position close to the Continent, a deep water anchorage between the Goodwin Sands and the shore, and defended by shore batteries. In the early seventeenth century the Bowles family of Deal forged strong links with the Crispes of Thanet, to whom they were related, whose London company was actively involved in the African trade. Nicholas Crispe had created the Company of Merchants Trading into Africa in 1631, the direct ancestor of the Royal African Company. The Bowles were employed in the Guinea trade in the 1650s. Tobias Bowles, four times mayor of Deal, with offices there and in London, conducted a trade mainly in sugar and tobacco with Maryland. In 1704 the Bowles imported African ivory worth £430, and in 1715 Tobias and George Bowles sent a Deal-registered sloop to trade on the River Gambia. Four years later a Deal wine merchant, Henry Alexander Primrose, who was the son-in-law of Tobias Bowles, chartered the sloop *Samuel* for Guinea, eventually delivering 98 slaves to a Barbados slave merchant in June 1720. Deal also sent goods for sale in west Africa and supplied men to crew ships.⁵ Another Deal family directly involved in the slave trade was the Boys. In October 1726, William Boys sailed on the *Luxborough Galley* to Cabinda where the ship loaded 600 slaves. On the 'middle passage' to Jamaica, one third of the human cargo died. Returning to London with a cargo of rum and sugar, the vessel caught fire and was abandoned with considerable loss of crew.⁶

In the eighteenth century it would have been difficult for those in Kent involved either directly in the West Indian islands, such as John Matson, town clerk of Sandwich and Chief Justice of Dominica, or in the services connected with extra-European commerce and shipping (such as banking and insurance), not to have benefited in one way or another from the slave trade and slavery. Slave-produced goods constituted a significant source of Britain's overseas derived wealth. Francis Cobb (snr), and his partner Hooper, of Margate acted as agents for owners of a cargo and were also involved in the business of salvage. In September 1782 when the *Emperor*, bound from Jamaica to London with a cargo of sugar, pimento, rum, and cotton was lost on the Mouve Sands, Cobbs' salvage operation

involved two sloops, three large boats and more than 50 men. Eighteen months later Cobb and his partner acted as agents for the owners of a cargo of sugar and rum lost when the *Matilda* from Jamaica was wrecked off Margate. And as brewers Cobbs were happy to supply merchants with ale and porter destined for the Danish West Indian island colony of St Croix with its harsh slave regime.⁷ And so it may have been with other similar commercial companies and concerns in Kentish towns and ports.⁸ Some of the migrants from Kent to the American colonies settled in societies where slavery was well established. How many became slave owners, like Isaac Titford from Cranbrook who bought a Jamaican estate in St Katherine producing coffee and pimento, is unknown.⁹

The Bowles and the Boys were directly involved in the murky business of buying slaves in west Africa and shipping them to the American colonies. Behind them, as always, were the big men, merchants who supplied capital and advanced goods, who oiled and organised trading systems, dealing in human lives from the comfort of city offices. Slave trading, and the importation of slave-produced goods, were profitable concerns that girdled a large part of the globe; East Indies' cloth and cowries were shipped west to meet British manufactured goods, both to be traded for African slaves. Prominent in this were a number of merchants who leased or bought property in north-west Kent, rural homes conveniently placed for easy access to the City. Years later, in 1821, William Cobbett, certainly not an impartial voice and also indifferent to colonial slavery, wrote in his *Rural Rides* of the 'infinite corruption in Kent, owing partly to the swarms of West Indians, nabobs, commissioners, and others of nearly the same description, that have selected it for the place of their residence'.¹⁰ Whether or not they were corrupt is one matter; certainly many were rich and partly on the proceeds of their involvement with slavery and the slave trade.

Among the cluster of wealthy merchants living in metropolitan Kent, in Blackheath and Greenwich, was John Angerstein, a founder of Lloyds, who owned a one-third share in a Grenada plantation; there was also Ambrose Crowley, the iron manufacturer with extensive wharfing interests in Greenwich, whose manacles and chains were supplied for slave ships and to plantation owners. Duncan Campbell (1726-1803), lived in Greenwich and owned 'Saltspring' a plantation in Hanover parish, Jamaica. In 1784 he bought property at West Kingsdown, subsequently paying a total of £21,458 for 2,000 acres; at his death his son inherited the Jamaica estates. Thomas King, with a house near to Blackheath Common, was a partner in a firm of slave agents, Camden, Calvert and King. Nearby were the homes and estates of John Boyd (1718-1800) at *Danson House*, Bexleyheath, Sir Alexander Grant (1705-1772) in Eltham, and John Sargent (1714-91) at *May Place*, Crayford.

Boyd's father, Augustus, was a director and vice-chairman of the East India Company; he owned property in Lewisham, plantations in

St Kitts, and at his death in 1765 left an estate valued at £50,000. His son, John, inherited four West Indian estates from his grandmother and from his father giving him sufficient wealth to have *Danson House* built as a Palladian villa. John Boyd, created a baronet in 1775, had been in partnership with fellow expatriate Scots, Richard Oswald (1705-84) and Alexander Grant, a company in which Sargent was a shareholder. In 1748 Oswald, Grant & Co. had bought the former Royal African Company trading post on Bance Island, Sierra Leone, from where they bartered with Africans for slaves who were then sold on to European traders for transport to the Americas.¹¹ During the Seven Years' War with France from 1756 to 1763, Boyd bought several plantations in the islands of Grenada and Dominica, but his interests were hit by the fall in the price of sugar, the capture of St Kitts by the French, during which brief period a number of his slaves died from starvation, and the collapse of his bank. The onset of the American Revolution further hit his finances. Boyd's eldest daughter married one of his partners, John Trevanion, elected MP for Dover in 1783, who acquired plantations in the Windward Islands and later in the eastern Caribbean. When Sir John Boyd died his will provided an annuity of £1,200 to his wife Catherine out of his 'plantation with the slaves and other appurtenances ... in the island of St Christopher ...'.¹² John Sargent, a shareholder in Oswald, Grant & Co. and thus intimately concerned with the success of the Bance Island venture, became a director of the Bank of England and a leading light in the Ohio Company. He served in the Commons as member for Midhurst (1753-60) and then for West Looe (1765-8), selling his Bance Island interest in 1771, when he bought *Halstead Place*, on the North Downs overlooking Sevenoaks. On his death the estate passed to a relative, George Arnold Arnold, who owned land in neighbouring Knockholt, bought with income derived from the family firm that had East Indian and west African interests. In the early nineteenth century, *Halstead Place* was bought by the London Alderman Abram Atkins, whose wealth was based on shipping with Bermuda and Jamaica. Two other associates of Oswald, Grant & Co. were Robert Scott, who had an estate at Blackheath (he also owned plantations in Grenada and St Vincent), and Robert Stratton with property at Charlton.

Colonial plantations, mainly in the Caribbean, were bought by merchants but also often came by marriage settlement or inheritance. When Mary Ann, the daughter of David Orme of *Lamorby*, Bexley, married Neill Malcolm in 1797, she received a settlement of lands in Jamaica which included 207 slaves.¹³ The Malcolms, of Poltalloch, Argyllshire, had made great profit from their Jamaican plantations. Robert Marsham, Lord Romney, of *Mote Place* near Maidstone, in 1724 married Priscilla, daughter and sole heir of Charles Pym of the island of St Christopher (St Kitts). When Pym died in 1740, Romney thus became, through his wife, owner of those estates valued at £19,000 sterling.¹⁴ Romney died in

1793 and the St Kitts estates were inherited by his son Charles who was MP for the County in three successive parliaments; he pulled down the Mote and rebuilt it. James Beckford Wildman (d.1816), who owned three Jamaican properties – Salt Savannah estate, Papine in St Andrews, and Low Ground in Clarendon, with a total of 640 slaves – bought Chilham Castle in 1792.¹⁵ The profits derived from the slave trade and slavery contributed to certain Kentish family fortunes, although lack of data makes it impossible to quantify how much and also how such income was used or invested.¹⁶

There were several members of Parliament for Kent constituencies, for example Charles Romney and John Trevanion, who owned slave estates in the Caribbean or had a vested interest in the slave trade. William Geary (1756-1825), of *Oxenhoath*, one of the County members from 1796-1806, and again from 1812-18, in the Commons in Spring 1804 questioned the propriety of immediate abolition arguing that such action was likely to benefit other nations. Joseph Marryatt (1757-1824), who owned an imposing house in Sydenham, was a merchant and ship owner with interests in the Caribbean islands of Grenada, Jamaica, Trinidad, Martinique and Guadeloupe, as well as in north America. As agent for Trinidad, and then for Grenada (agents representing islands were active lobbyists), he petitioned Parliament against abolition in February 1807. Elected MP for Horsham in 1808, and then for Sandwich four years later (until 1824), he spoke on aspects of the slave trade and slavery, arguing that there was no need for a registry of slaves as this would infringe the legislative rights of individual islands, and that since the slave trade had been abolished plantation owners had a vested interest in treating their slaves humanely. He further argued that the imperial Parliament should not emancipate slaves as the system of slavery would die a natural death.¹⁷ Those commercial men who became Kentish landowners, the plantation owners resident in the County, and MPs with commercial and family interests in the American colonies, undoubtedly presented an anti-abolitionist presence in Kent. However, to what extent they exercised that influence is difficult to calculate. It is a subject well worth further investigation, particularly at the local level, although there are obvious problems in quantifying the extent of their opposition in defence of the slave trade and later to the manumission of slaves in the colonies. Analysing the changing views of electors is clearly a challenging task.

The West Indian lobby, as it has been called, collectively represented by the Society of West Indian Merchants that emerged in the 1760s, and embraced planters in 1773, was not a homogenous body. Its members did not speak with a common voice as they represented different islands and a variety of often conflicting interests. The American war divided plantation interests and put the West Indian Committee on the defensive, but at the same time it greatly altered the relationship between the West Indian

legislatures and the home parliament.¹⁸ Within Kent there were voices ready to rally to the support of the West Indian interest, for example with letters to the local press.¹⁹ The Reverend Thomas Thompson (1708/9-73), formerly employed as a missionary in North America and in west Africa by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (the SPG owned slaves in the Caribbean), while vicar of Reculver, wrote a pamphlet, published in Canterbury, arguing that slavery was consistent with humanity and Christian principles.²⁰

The abolitionist campaign

The successful assault on the British slave trade was a great achievement. Opponents of the slave trade from the 1780s onwards set out to bring to an end a system of trade that was widely regarded as essential to the continuing economic prosperity of Britain and her overseas Empire. There has been no shortage of studies of the significance of the Atlantic trade, and particularly the contribution made by the slave trade and slave production to the fortunes of the British economy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, from the influential ideas of Eric Williams in the 1940s to the detailed economic analysis of Joseph Inikori in 2002.²¹ Whatever the precise figures for the value of that trans-Atlantic trade, it was of undoubted significance to the British economy and perceived to be so by many people at many levels. And it seems clear from the examples given above that individual and family fortunes partly turned on it. To challenge and secure legislation to remove from this economic edifice the transshipment of slaves from Africa to the American colonies was a serious and daunting task involving a twenty-year struggle that eventually secured abolition in 1807. The obstacles were enormous. Slavery and the slave trade had been a global and European activity for many centuries. The West Indian economy relied upon the continued importation of slaves to maintain a labour force which demographically failed to reproduce itself. And contrary to the view that the West Indian economy was in decline in the years 1793-1807, it now seems that slave productivity was increasing and that West Indian wealth was not diminishing. In short, abolitionists were assaulting a vital and thriving component of the domestic and Imperial economy.²² Abolition was not gained solely by parliamentary manoeuvres pressured by extra-parliamentary lobbying. Great political events such as the American and French Revolutions not only altered perceptions of Empire and patterns of overseas commerce but also changed peoples' world political views. However important these external factors, the domestic campaign to persuade people and parliament that the slave trade was immoral and that its continued practice had negative political value is among the first great popular lobbies in British history.

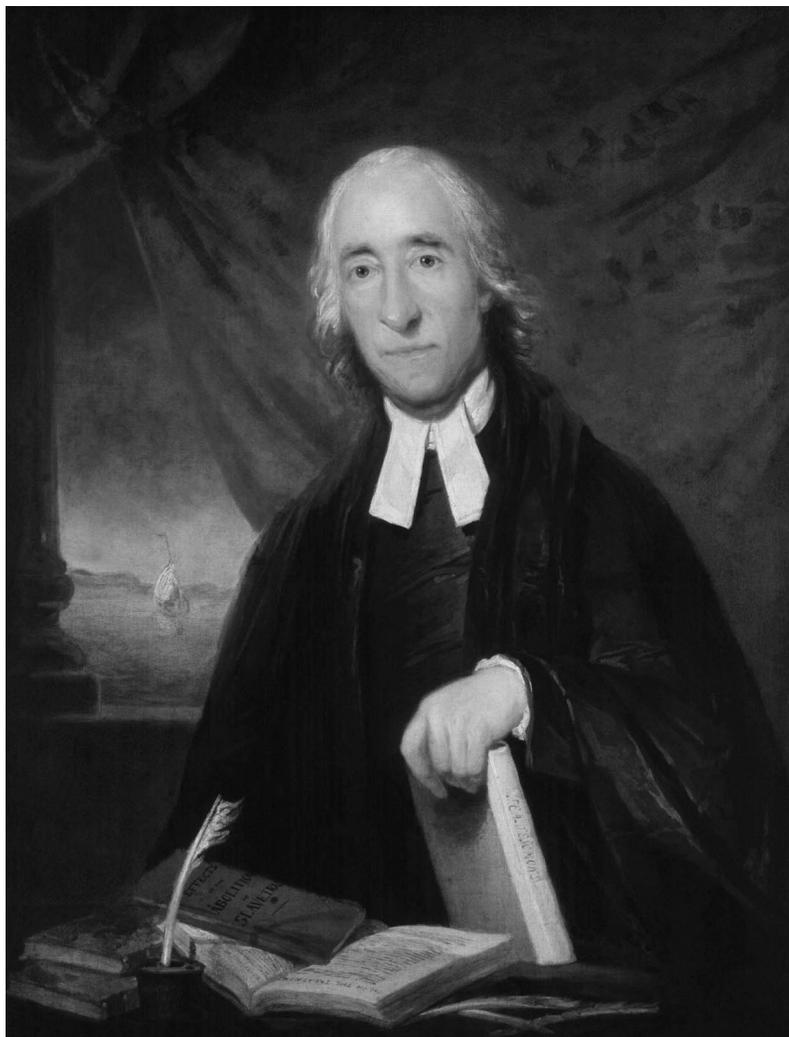
Although slaving practices were pursued in the Atlantic world, black people were generally recognised as fellow human beings despite the continued circulation of books and pamphlets that suggested otherwise. Since the beginning of the age of reconnaissance in the fifteenth century, people from Africa had come to Britain. By 1770 they probably numbered just over 10,000 (one contemporary estimate suggested double that figure), mainly living in London (Westminster, and the City), Liverpool, and Bristol.²³ Some eighty per cent were men who worked as servants, labourers, artisans, and as sailors who were invariably itinerant workers. Black sailors were not uncommon in Kent ports, particularly Deptford, Gravesend, and on the lower Medway. Many West Indian planters and merchants trading to the Americas brought black servants with them to Britain; black retainers are a common feature in many family portraits of the period. The legal position of black people in Britain was ambiguous. The slave trade from Africa was a legal commerce in property, and the colonies' local legislation stated that black slaves could be bought, sold and owned as chattels. But what was the legal status of black slaves once they were brought into Britain? Some slaves, and also some owners, falsely believed that baptism endowed them with freedom; some opponents of the slave trade argued that no human being could be a slave on English soil. Despite various judicial and extra-judicial statements the law was unclear.

The first moves to challenge the slave trade came in the late 1760s and 1770s with successful attempts by Granville Sharp (1735-1813) to secure the release of black slaves brought into England whose owners attempted to ship them back to the colonies. These actions helped to promote public awareness of the brutalities of the slave trade and excite humane sentiment. One of the first cases was that of Thomas Lewis, a black man seized at night time in Chelsea by Robert Stapylton and shipped down river to be sold to the West Indies. Lewis' cries for help were heard. Sharp was alerted, and he succeeded in securing a writ of *habeas corpus* which was served by the mayor of Gravesend for Lewis' release.²⁴ A significant case, brought by Sharp in 1772, resulted in the release of a slave named Somerset, and the declaration by Lord Justice Mansfield that black slaves could not be forcibly removed from England and Wales.²⁵ This did not state that black people could not be slaves in England, but the declaration effectively marked the beginning of the end of the idea that slavery could exist in this country. An illustration of the continuing vagueness of the law is a comment attached to the baptism of little Thomas West at Chislehurst in January 1788: 'a negro of about 6 years of age, who had been sent over as a present to Lord Sydney from Governor Orde of Dominica'!²⁶ Whatever Sharp's actions in raising consciousness about the slave trade, he did not start an anti-slavery movement. That had to wait until the end of the American war in the 1780s, the slow mobilisation of Quaker anti-

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slavery activity, which included petitioning Parliament in 1783, and the growing political confidence of opponents of the slave trade that they could press for legislative change.

PLATE II



James Ramsay (1733-89), Vicar of Teston, 1781-9, an oil painting by Carl Frederik von Breda, 1788. (Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, London)

The Anti-Slavery Society was formed in London and held its first meeting in May 1787. Within four months the Committee had expanded its membership and activities and begun to collect the names of subscribers county by county. Two significant figures in the extra-parliamentary campaign were Thomas Clarkson, and the Reverend James Ramsay (1733-89) who held the livings at Teston and Nettlestead on the Medway. Clarkson had secured a Cambridge University Latin prize for *An essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species*. Returning to London from Cambridge, where he had read his essay, he had a ‘Damascus road’ experience which turned him to an active life of opposition to the slave trade and then to slavery. Ramsay’s abhorrence of the slave trade, and his deep concern that slaves in the West Indian islands should hear the Christian Gospel, had been cultivated by nineteen years’ residence in St Kitts first as a medical doctor and then a clergyman. His views were set out in two influential books that he published in 1784 on the treatment and conversion of slaves in the British sugar colonies, and on the effects of the abolition of the slave trade.²⁷ Ramsay’s living at Teston and Nettlestead was due to the benefaction of the pietistic and charitably-minded Elizabeth Bouverie (c.1726-98) who lived at *Teston House* (the present *Barham Court*, Teston). Bouverie, a single lady, was an evangelical and she shared her home with her close friends Margaret Middleton and her husband, naval politician Sir Charles Middleton, later Lord Barham (1726-1813). Bouverie and the Middletons opposed the slave trade.²⁸ The other figure in the Teston ‘circle’ was Bielby Porteus (1731-1809), Bishop of Chester and then of London, who had preached and written against the slave trade; he held the nearby living of Hunton where he spent a good part of each year.²⁹

In the summer of 1786 Clarkson spent a month with Ramsay at Teston. They were frequently joined by the Middletons and Porteus, and also by the evangelical Hannah More (1745-1833), a close friend of Margaret Middleton. In these discussions the merely ameliorative ideas of the Teston ‘circle’ were challenged, Ramsay became more outspoken against the slave trade, and Clarkson’s career took a new direction as he declared himself ‘ready to devote myself to the cause ... of the oppressed Africans’. Hannah More wrote that this time at Teston would prove to be ‘the Runnymede of the negroes, and that the great charter of African liberty will be there completed’.³⁰ Clarkson left Teston promising to provide ‘my friend Mr. Ramsay [with] a weekly account of my progress’, but after four weeks it had become ‘so voluminous that I was obliged to decline writing it’.³¹ In the autumn of 1786 Wilberforce visited Teston to talk with Ramsay. Several months later, in May 1787, he met with Pitt and Grenville at the former’s estate, *Holwood* in Keston, to the west of the County, where it was agreed that he would introduce a Bill in Parliament to end the slave trade.

It is apparent that the initial geographical focus of the London Committee included the metropolitan areas of surrounding counties. In December 1788 subscriptions were advertised in the *Morning Chronicle* and the *General Evening Post*, London newspapers that circulated in the metropolis and the neighbouring counties, addressed to those 'residing in London and its vicinity', which presumably embraced metropolitan Kent and the towns of Deptford, Woolwich, and Greenwich.³² Many of the first supporters and subscribers contacted in Kent appear to have come through the Quaker network. The first supporters of the Abolition Committee can be taken from the *List* of subscribers published in 1788, the minute book of the Committee, and also from the local press. In 1787 of the over 2,000 subscribers throughout the country, a mere 20 or so can be identified by name and place as living in Kent, nearly half of them in Canterbury. The *List* includes four women, two of them aristocrats, Lady Middleton and Grizel the Dowager Countess Stanhope of Chevening, plus Elizabeth Bouverie and Mrs Ringsford of Canterbury. 'Mrs Bouverie' (older single ladies were so described) contributed five guineas, a sum matched by Peter Nouaille, the owner of a silk works at Greatness, Sevenoaks.³³ Quakers subscribers in Dover included Richard Low and Richard Baker, and in Canterbury John Chalk, a hoyman, and William Pattison, a glover (not included in the 1787 *List*).³⁴ By 1788 other supporters had been enlisted and included William Cooper of Rochester, and Ellington Wright of Erith who wrote to the Committee on 24 June 1788, both of whom were known to Clarkson. When the Committee sent out its first annual report in August 1788, fifty copies went to the Revd Thomas Cherry (1748-1822), the Church of England headmaster of Maidstone Grammar School, an Anglican supporter and one assumes a signatory of the Maidstone petition of that year (see below).

In 1788 Clarkson toured the south coast of England, beginning in July in Kent, to raise support for abolition. The visit to the County was not a success and lasted less than a month with Clarkson returning to London due to 'the difficulties which have occurred during the late Journey of exciting a sufficient degree of public attention to form Committees'.³⁵ Kent with its naval towns and vested establishment interests was clearly not a fruitful field. In certain towns, for example Rochester, those who might lend their support to the abolitionist cause could or would not because this 'would involve counteracting obligations of political support'.³⁶ There were two great petition campaigns directed at Parliament demanding the abolition of the slave trade; they came from all over the country and from three sources: institutions such as guilds and universities, counties, and towns and boroughs. In 1788 there were 100 petitions and in 1792, a more popular response, when 519 petitions were submitted to Parliament. Most petitions came from the north of England and the industrial areas. There was a poor response from the densely populated counties of the

south. The only petitions from Kent came from two boroughs: Maidstone, in 1788, and Folkestone in 1792,³⁷ although the Lord Mayor and 20 Alderman meeting in the Court of Common Council in Canterbury, in early February 1788, unanimously agreed to petition Parliament, and appointed a committee to act.³⁸ Writing to Samuel Hoare in late December 1787, James Ramsay said that Sir William Bishop, the Mayor of Maidstone, was ‘desirous of giving the assistance of his Office for procuring a petition for the abolition of the Slave Trade from the Corporation to the parliament. He only wishes to have a form, that it may meet your wishes, and know when you would that they should come forward’.³⁹ Meanwhile, in 1790, Clarkson, with Middleton’s support (he was then at the Admiralty) was looking over 160 vessels at the ‘sea stations’ of Deptford, Woolwich, Chatham, and Sheerness in an unsuccessful attempt to gather evidence on the conduct and impact of the slave trade.⁴⁰

Why only two Kent towns produced and presented petitions is a subject that requires further research; it may be, as with Canterbury, that petitions were proposed but for some reason not proceeded with. Maidstone’s population included a sizeable radical element among paper makers and those who worked on the river, plus a good number of dissenters. In the case of Folkestone it may be that influential individuals embraced the cause of abolition and organised the petition through their local contacts and influence. Although the ‘weight of government’ and official patronage had a heavy influence in Kent towns from Greenwich to Dover, there were also several pockets of working class radicalism. In the 1790s branches of the United Corresponding Society were active in Rochester, where there were 200 members, and in Linton, Brompton, Gravesend, and also in Maidstone. One of the first statements of the Society was on human equality, and John Gale Jones, in his political tour through north and mid Kent on behalf of the Society in 1796, openly denounced not only the slave trade but also slavery.⁴¹ Kent was not dominated by large landed interests and a tradition of yeoman independence pervaded the limited electorate. In addition, in the old heartlands of religious dissent such as the towns and villages of the Weald, there were undoubtedly those who instinctively opposed the slave trade. Generally across the country, the opponents of the slave trade, both men and women, were drawn from the ‘middling sort’. A close scrutiny of local newspapers may reveal abolitionist subscribers and petitioners, although in an age when the franchise was highly restricted the voices of working men and women may not have been registered. The common voice may be better recorded in church records. For example, in 1789, Pastor John Lloyd, of Tenterden Particular Baptist church, was requested to ‘preach a Discourse relative to the African Slave Trade in Order to Discountenance the Same’.⁴² Although other Baptist associations in southern counties subscribed to and financially supported the work of the London Committee, the Kent

and Sussex Association of Baptist Churches appears to have said nothing. Other denominational records would be well worth investigating to see if dissenters, and also Methodists following John Wesley's forthright denunciation of the slave trade, made their views known across the County.

The anti-Jacobin reaction of the 1790s (and the slave risings on the French island of Saint-Domingue, and on Grenada and St Vincent in 1794-5) helped to suppress protest of various forms, and determined that the 1792 petition against the slave trade was not followed by others. However, as Drescher has argued, this did not mean that public opinion ceased to play a significant role in the pressure that eventually brought about the passage of the Foreign Slave Trade Abolition Bill of 1806, prohibiting British ships from carrying slaves to foreign ports, and the total abolition of the British slave trade in 1807.⁴³ In 1784 Sir Charles Middleton won a seat at Rochester, ensuring one sympathetic voice for abolition from the County in the Commons. According to Humphries, over the next two decades the Kentish press 'was unusually silent on national affairs' and 'the early struggles against the slave trade were not the issues to inspire mass agitation'.⁴⁴ And yet, Edward Knatchbull, elected an MP for the County in 1790, two years later argued in the Commons that the slave trade be ended in 1796, a motion passed there but subsequently rejected in the Lords. Another abolitionist was the undistinguished MP for Dover, C.S. Pybus, who voted for the Abolition Bill in 1796 and also in support of the Slave Trade Limiting Bill in 1799. But these appear to be alone among Kent MPs who were in favour of either outright abolition or regulation of the slave trade during the 1790s. At the Canterbury by-election of 1800, Joseph Royle, a radical candidate who supported abolition, was defeated but not necessarily because he was an abolitionist. In the 1802 election he stood again denouncing the system of representation and proclaiming that he was 'a decided enemy to the Slave Trade in all its branches'. After 1805 (did victory over the French and Spanish at Trafalgar have an influence?) parliamentary sentiment was changing. In the parliamentary elections of November 1806, John Calcraft, at Rochester, spoke of his recent support for abolition, while the three County candidates also identified with the abolitionist cause. Sir William Geary stated that 'no one was more anxious for its abolition than himself' and associated his sentiments with those of Wilberforce; Knatchbull felt likewise and recalled his motion of 1792 for the discontinuance of the trade, while Honeywood described the slave trade 'as disgusting to human nature, as it was disgraceful to Englishmen'.⁴⁵ However, although the principal topic of debate from the hustings was the slave trade, as the *Kentish Chronicle* stated 'this was scarcely an issue capable of swaying large numbers of voters, even had the candidates disagreed violently'.⁴⁶ But for at least one Kent elector it was not just sufficient to vote for a local abolitionist candidate; Francis Cobb

of Margate expressed his support for Wilberforce in the Hull election of 1807 and received in return a letter of thanks from the grateful victor.⁴⁷

One consistent although unpredictable voice opposing the slave trade in the Lords was that of the reform-minded Whig, Lord Stanhope of Chevening (1753-1816).⁴⁸ In notebooks, titled 'Slave Trade 1' and 'Slave Trade 2', he recorded details of the slave trade, along with occasional personal comments. From these notes we know that he read Olaudah Equiano's *Narrative*, published in 1789, a best-selling two-volume account of an African's experience of the slave trade and slavery, that went into several editions.⁴⁹ Wilberforce wrote to Stanhope, in January 1788, soliciting his support for the abolitionist cause:

For many reason, I am clear, and Pitt is of the same opinion, that 'tis extremely desirable that petitions for the abolition of the trade in flesh and blood should flow in from every quarter of the kingdom: they are going forward in many places and counties, nor is there any need of general meetings in the case of the latter, which might be inconvenient at this season of the year, and on such a short notice we can only allow on this occasion. I know how friendly *you must* be to my motion, and I trust you will lay a load of parchment on the shoulders of the members of the County of Kent ...⁵⁰

Stanhope was in contact with the London Committee, in 1789 expressing 'in the warmest manner his disposition to promote the cause in the House of Lords'. In 1804, during the Lord's debate on Wilberforce's measure to abolish the slave trade, he made what Wilberforce described in his diary, as 'a wild speech ... [that] contained some most mischievous passages, threatening the Lords that by means of his stereotype press he would circulate millions of papers among the people and deluge the country with accounts of the cruelties of the Slave Trade and of the barbarous treatment of the Slaves in the West Indies'.⁵¹

Conclusion

The campaign to end the British slave trade was successful in 1807. The transatlantic trade in Africans, with all its harsh and murderous methods, became illegal for British subjects. The Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade had achieved its purpose, but slavery remained in the colonial empire.⁵² The struggle to end slavery took another thirty years and was only finally achieved in 1833 following the greatest mass-petitioning campaign then in British history. Full emancipation came in 1838 after a further four years of lobbying. The abolitionist movement by the late 1780s, as Brown argues, 'had come to enjoy moral prestige ... because antislavery sentiment ... had become uncontroversial *and*, more unusually, because antislavery organizing had come to seem worthy of

esteem'.⁵³ From then, using the tactics of 'modern' organisation, sentiment was mobilised nation-wide to press the cause on Parliament. A good deal is known about the ideas and actions of the organisers of abolition, that is, of the politics from above. Far less is known of the politics from below, the responses and actions at the local level that actually turned this cause into a popular movement. What did people think in the shires? Did they read the numerous pamphlets and books that denounced the slave trade? How did they respond to the demands to boycott slave-grown sugar and other produce in the 1790s? What was said in churches and places of assembly? Who was prepared to put his hand in his pocket, and who was willing to turn out and vote for the cause, and why? Did the urban and rural working class support abolition? Women were clearly involved in the campaign, but to what extent? And how did the West Indian interest react in Kent in the years 1792-3, and what influence, if any, did they try to exercise in parliamentary elections, and over tenants and other dependants? Further research is required to investigate to what extent the question of abolition exercised minds and political passions in Kent during the period 1780s-1807. Existing research on the years 1807-1833, which also needs to be revisited, argues that the clamour for the emancipation of slaves in the British Empire was not an issue that greatly exercised Kentish electors or MPs.⁵⁴ This article has merely sketched the process of abolition in Kent and must be considered as 'work in progress' that hopefully will succeed in challenging others to undertake further research.

ENDNOTES

¹ E.g. the parish records of Aldington, 1734; Aylesford, 1670; Burmarsh, 1680, 1692, and 1701; Dymchurch 1680; East Farleigh, 1680s; Loose, 1685; Murston, 1670 and 1754; Tenterden, 1628; and Yalding, 1735. As late as 1817 a Tunisian corsair, one of a pair, was apprehended in the Channel and brought 'into the Downs'.

² Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral capital: foundations of British abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), provides a skilful analysis of the trans-Atlantic roots of abolitionism. See also Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic slave trade and British abolition, 1760-1807* (London, 1975), and Adam Hochschild, *Bury the chains: the British struggle to abolish slavery* (London, 2005). On the slave trade, see James Walvin, *Black ivory: A history of British slavery* (London, 1992), and more broadly, Hugh Thomas, *The slave trade. The history of the Atlantic slave trade 1440-1870* (New York, 1997).

³ Local studies include E.M. Hunt, 'The north of England agitation for the abolition of the slave trade, 1780-1850', MA thesis, University of Manchester, 1959; Hunt, 'The anti-slave trade agitation in Manchester', *Lancashire & Cheshire Antiquarian Society, Transactions*, CXXVI (1977); and on Bristol, Madge Dresser, *Slavery obscured. The social history of the slave trade in an English provincial port* (London, 2001), chs 4-5.

⁴ James A. Rawley, *London, Metropolis of the Slave Trade* (Columbia MO and London, 2003), chs. 2, 3 and 8.

⁵ Nigel Tattersfield, *The forgotten trade: comprising the log of the Daniel and Henry of 1700 and accounts of the slave trade from the minor ports of England, 1698-1725* (London, 1991), pp. 202-11. See also W.H. Bowles, *Records of the Bowles family* (London, 1918), pp. 30 ff.

⁶ William Boys, *An Account of the loss of the Luxborough Galley by Fire, on her voyage from Jamaica to London ... in the year 1727* (London, 1787). Is the Thomas Boys, master of the brigantine *Adventure* at Jamaica in 1709 with 120 slaves (TNA, Kew, CO142/14), and later in the century recorded as trading in slaves from Gambia to Virginia, of the same family?

⁷ Centre for Kentish Studies (CKS), East Kent Archives Centre. Cobb papers. U1453/O28/1; U1453/B5/4/97; and B5/4/167.

⁸ Beyond the period under discussion, but perhaps pertinent, is the entry in the shipping register relating to the *Emma* of Ramsgate (133 tons), owned by Sir William Curtis Bt (1752-1829) of Ramsgate, which was 'condemned as a prize at Sierra Leone on 5 October 1822 for being engaged in the slave trade'. CKS. East Kent Archives Centre. RBS/Sal/1.

⁹ Cranbrook Museum Archives, Cranbrook, 5266 2.1, TIT, is an indenture for the sale of the estate and the slaves, who are listed, dd. 1806. See also Anthony R. Titford, 'A family of Dissenters: the Titfords of Somerset, Kent & London, ts., 2005, vol. 1, part 3, pp. 9-13. The author is grateful to Stuart Bligh and to Betty Carmen for this reference.

¹⁰ William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (1830; Everyman edn, London, 1957), vol. 1, p. 45.

¹¹ David Hancock, *Citizens of the world: London merchants and the integration of the British Atlantic community, 1756-1785* (Cambridge, 1995), describes in splendid detail the commercial interests of Oswald, Grant and Co.

¹² Bexley Local Studies and Archive Centre (LSAC), Bexley. Danson papers. LS CO/DAN/9. A brief account of slave owners in Bexley is by Oliver Wooler, *The great estates* (Bexley, 2000), pp. 32-3, 60-5, and 100.

¹³ Bexley LSAC. DR/2/38-39, 1797.

¹⁴ CKS, Maidstone. Romney papers. Marriage settlement U1300 T4/7, 1724; CKS 1515 E284, will dd. 16 March 1741, 'An estimate of the reall and personall (*sic*) estate of the late Capt. Charles Pym in the Island of St Christopher'.

¹⁵ Edward Hasted, *The history and topographical survey of the County of Kent*, vol. VII, 1798, p. 276; addendum in Vol. VIII, p. 544, corrects 'Thomas' to James. Robert Gordon, *The Jamaica church: Why it has failed* (London nd., c.1872), p. 10.

¹⁶ For an example from Wealden Sussex, where the Fullers used proceeds from Jamaican estates to invest in charcoal, iron and gun founding, see D.W. Crossley and R. Saville, eds, *The Fuller letters: guns, slaves and finances, 1728-1755* (Lewes: Sussex Record Society, vol. 26, 1991).

¹⁷ Joseph Marryat, *Thoughts on the abolition of the slave trade ...* (London 1816). Ralph Bernal, MP for Rochester 1820-41, and owner of inherited Jamaican estates, also argued for the slow pace of emancipation; as a representative of West Indian interests he stressed that slaves were legal property; see Ralph Bernal, *Substance of the Speech of Ralph Bernal Esq. in the House of Commons, on the 19th May, 1826* (London, 1826).

¹⁸ See Andrew J. O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire divided. The American revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia PA, 2000).

¹⁹ E.g. *Kentish Gazette*, letters from 'E.B', 16 May 1788, p. 2; from 'GRENADA', 3 June 1788, p. 2; and from 'A Speculist', 8-12 August 1788, p. 2, and 22 August 1788, p. 2.

²⁰ Thomas Thompson, *The African Trade for Negro Slaves. Shewn to be Consistent with Principles of Humanity, and with the Laws of Revealed Religion* (Canterbury, 1772). Eleven years later Charles Crawford, born in Antigua of a slave-owning family, wrote an anti-slavery poem, *Liberty: A Pindaric Ode* (first published in Tunbridge Wells, Canterbury, Maidstone and London, 1783); in a lengthy footnote he argued that Christian principles demanded that Africans be treated as equals and as brethren, that the slave trade was the opprobrium of England and should be abolished immediately, but (and contrary to the ideas of the 'profane scribbler' Thomas Paine) that emancipation of slaves in the West Indies should be gradual.

²¹ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; London, 1964); Joseph E. Inikori, *Africans and the industrial revolution in England* (Cambridge, 2002). For these debates, see Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery, Atlantic trade and the British economy, 1660-1800* (Cambridge, 2000).

²² See David Richardson, 'The British Empire and the Atlantic slave trade, 1660-1807', in P.J. Marshall, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Vol. II. The eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 440-64.

²³ See Peter Fryer, *Staying power. The history of Black people in Britain* (London, 1984). Also Kathy Chater, 'Untold histories: Black people in England during the British slave trade, 1660-1807', Ph.D thesis, University of London, 2007 (forthcoming).

²⁴ Thomas Clarkson, *The history of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade by the British parliament*, 2 vols (London, 1808), I, pp. 73-4.

²⁵ See Stephen M. Wise, *Though the heavens may fall. The landmark trial that led to the end of human slavery* (Cambridge MA, 2005).

²⁶ Chislehurst baptism records, 20 January 1788. Lord Sydney, Thomas Townshend (1733-1800), was Deputy Lt of Kent, a minister in various Pitt administrations, and in 1787 spoke but did not vote against the slave regulation bill. The author is grateful to Mr Peter J.R. Masson for this reference.

²⁷ See Folarin Shyllon, *James Ramsay: the unknown abolitionist* (Edinburgh, 1977).

²⁸ William Cowper's anti-slave trade poem, 'The Negro's Complaint', written at the request of the Anti-Slavery Society, was published in the *Kentish Gazette*, 8 August 1788, with the comment that it had been 'sent to a lady who had interested herself much in the cause of the slave trade', possibly a reference to Elizabeth Bouverie or Margaret Middleton.

²⁹ On the Teston 'circle', see Brown, *Moral capital*, pp. 341-52, 362-77.

³⁰ Anne Stott, *Hannah More: the first Victorian* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 100-101. Oldfield describes it 'as surely one of the most important events in the history of British anti-slavery': J.R. Oldfield, *Popular politics and the British anti-slavery. The mobilisation of public opinion against the slave trade, 1787-1807* (London, 1998), p. 72.

³¹ Clarkson, *History*, I, p. 242.

³² British Library [BL] Add Mss. 21255, Anti-Slave Trade Committee minute books. Entry for 9 December 1788; and 21256, entry for 19 May 1805. See *Kentish Gazette*, 15 January 1788, p. 3.

³³ *List of the Society, Instituted in 1787, For the Purpose of effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London, 1788).

³⁴ BL Add Mss. 21254, entry for 17 July 1788.

³⁵ BL Add. Mss 21255, entry for 26 August 1788.

³⁶ Peter F. Dixon, 'The politics of emancipation: the movement for the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, 1807-33. D.Phil thesis, Oxford, 1971. p. 112.

³⁷ Thomas Baker (1751?-1840) was then mayor; a Mr Eubulus Smith of Folkestone is also mentioned in the London Committee letter books as a supporter.

³⁸ *Kentish Gazette*, 5 February 1788, p. 3.

³⁹ Ramsay to Hoare, 29 December 1787. Huntington Library, San Marino, CA., Clarkson papers. CN 141, quoted by Oldfield, *Popular politics*, p. 49. Bishop also wrote to the London Committee, 6 February 1788.

⁴⁰ Clarkson, *History*, II, p. 174.

⁴¹ John Gale Jones, *A political tour through Rochester, Maidstone, Gravesend, etc* (London, 1796; new edn, Rochester, 1997), pp. 28-9.

⁴² Minutes, Tenterden Particular Baptist Church, 5 April 1789. The author is grateful to Mr Stephen Pickles for this reference.

⁴³ Seymour Drescher, 'Whose abolition? Popular pressure and the ending of the British slave trade', *Past & Present*, 143 (2004), p. 146; the speeches were recorded in the *Kentish Gazette*, 8 November 1806. See also Dixon, 'Politics of emancipation', pp. 113-5.

⁴⁴ Peter Leslie Humphries, 'Kentish politics and public opinion, 1768-1832', D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 1981, p. 134. The Kentish press was not silent on the slave trade in 1788; no literate person who read the local Kent press for that year can have been ignorant as to the Parliamentary and extra-Parliamentary debate on abolition.

⁴⁵ Humphries, 'Kentish politics', pp. 191-2, 228, and 230.

⁴⁶ *Kentish Chronicle*, 24 November 1806.

⁴⁷ CKS, East Kent Archives Centre. Cobb paper. U1453/C278. William Wilberforce to Francis Cobb, dd, Brighton, 27 August 1807. Francis Cobb (jnr) was one of the principal organisers of the anti-slavery cause in north-east Kent in the 1820s-30s; see U1453 O43, etc.

⁴⁸ Earlier, Sharp and other abolitionists had urged William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth (1731-1801), the pious and evangelically-minded Secretary of State for the American colonies, who had an estate in Blackheath, to promote the anti-slave trade cause in Parliament. Dartmouth failed to respond, appearing to prefer public office to risking possible public obloquy.

⁴⁹ CKS, Maidstone. Stanhope paper. U1590 C/72/1, 2.

⁵⁰ Aubrey Newman, *The Stanhopes of Chevening: A family biography* (London, 1969), p. 147.

⁵¹ Quoted by Newman, *The Stanhopes of Chevening*, p. 163.

⁵² BL Add Mss 21256. It is worth noting that the Committee, on 31 January 1792, denied claims made by the West Indian interest that they sought the 'emancipation of the Negroes in the British colonies', stressing that they adhered to their 'original Purpose' – 'the abolition of the Trade to the coast of Africa for Slaves'.

⁵³ Brown, *Moral capital*, p. 458.

⁵⁴ Dixon, 'The politics of emancipation'.

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