

Slavery and Milborne Port

Slavery is a horrific abuse of people's rights; let us also remember the history behind it. Slavery has existed since society began; the Domesday Book mentions two slaves in Milborne and slavery did not disappear from England until around 1100, although feudal serfdom was little better. In Africa, slavery was endemic and from the seventeenth century, European nations exploited this. Between 1662 and 1807, three and a half million African slaves were transported on British ships, while Portugal transported even more. Slavery was big business.

Putting the trade in context is important; in Britain workers had no rights, children worked from aged 6, and there were 220 crimes punishable by death, including 'strong evidence of malice in a child aged 7–14' or using a 'mask whilst committing a crime.' Executions were public spectacles.

Even so, the brutality of the slave trade meant people turned against it. In 1774, Mary Scott, the daughter of a wealthy linen merchant in Milborne Port, published *'The Female Advocate'*. In this poem she commends literary women, including Phyllis Wheatley, the first slave and black woman to have a book of poetry published in Britain. At the time women were still considered the property of their husband or father and had no rights, so they had a natural sympathy for enslaved people. In 1776, a motion 'that the slave trade is contrary to the laws of God and the rights of men' was debated in parliament, and the trade reached its peak in the 1780s. Then legislation limiting the number that could be carried on each ship was passed. New colonies in the Caribbean and the demand for their goods fuelled the trade but finally legislation was passed in both the Commons and the Lords which brought an end to Britain's involvement. From 1st May 1807, it was illegal for any British ship or British subject to trade in enslaved people.

Action was still needed to abolish slavery in the colonies and Milborne Port inhabitants sent anti-slavery petitions to the Commons on 30th March 1824 and to both Houses on 5th and 8th May 1826, while the Milborne Port Methodists sent anti-slavery petitions to the Commons on 15th December 1830, as did 'persons residing' in the town on 2nd March 1831.

The Slavery Abolition Act stopped slavery in most British colonies, freeing more than 800,000 enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and South Africa. It took effect on 1st August 1834 but the Act ensured that change was slow; it emancipated children under the age of six but older slaves were to be retained by their owners for four to six years as 'apprentices.' Those who had been enslaved did not receive any compensation, although the British government paid £20,000,000 for 'damages suffered' by the owners of registered slaves. These were not just plantation owners but included many ordinary people for whom owning

a slave had been a good investment. Slaves were like company shares today, the owners were paid a percentage of the plantation profits for the work the slave performed.

Like many places, Milborne Port played a small part in helping to get this appalling trade outlawed. However, while we rightly condemn the past trade, we should remember that modern slavery still continues.

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