

Hidden Chains: The Slavery Business and North East England, 1600–1865

John Charlton

Tyne Bridge Publishing

Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2008, pp. 180, pb, ISBN: 9781857951233

The bicentenary of the slave trade abolition act was marked in 2007 with an unprecedented wave of activity as museums, galleries, archives, libraries and a whole host of other organisations and groups marked the anniversary. Up and down the country, exhibitions, publications and events recalled this landmark date, but also provided an opportunity to reflect on centuries of British involvement in the trade before 1807 and on the legacies of this history. Many of these activities were ephemeral. This publication, however, is one of the more tangible and durable products of 2007, and will doubtless continue to make an important contribution to the historical debate for years to come.

Responding to the bicentenary, and transatlantic slavery in general, raised significant questions for cultural institutions and regions that were previously considered as having little or no connection with the Atlantic Ocean trading network. In the case of the North East, geography has encouraged historians and curators to think primarily about the region's links with the Baltic Sea and the North Sea. *Hidden Chains* is an important corrective to that approach, bringing to light the strong links that existed between the North East and slave-holding Atlantic economies, as well as foregrounding the personal involvement of people from the region both in that slave-trading system as well as the campaign that brought about its parliamentary abolition. Presented in a well-illustrated format, this book is scrupulously researched and lucidly written. It is the result of a wide-ranging research project, which drew together Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society, Northumberland Collections Service, the Robinson Library Special Collections and Tyne and Wear Archives (and Tyne and Wear Museums). These institutions had their collections and archives trawled for information relating to local involvement in slavery, the slave trade and its abolition. As a way of uncovering previously untold stories, as well as ensuring that personal accounts were brought to the fore, the approach adopted by the research team is to be commended. In academic terms too, the results have been truly revelatory, providing not just new ways of understanding the North East's local history, but also contributing to a wider debate about slavery and abolition. Enormous credit is due to the volunteers who undertook this work. The vision to implement such an approach also deserves acknowledgment and this could provide a useful model for future work of this kind.

Hidden Chains uncovers the personal and business networks of people like John Graham Clarke, whose involvement in slavery and the slave trade is indicative of their pervasive reach in eighteenth-century European society. Through a similar web of personal friendships and familial connections, other locals like Thomas Trotter, James Field Stanfield and Thomas Winterbottom provide evidence of a vibrant culture of abolition in the area. William Turner, a non-conformist minister and founder of the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society, is a classic example of someone who is both an Enlightenment as well as an enlightened individual. His involvement in the abolition movement, traced through archival records, highlights the crucial importance of understanding how local networks contributed to the national and global picture.

There are plenty of other examples. The letter written by 'Humanus' to the *Newcastle Courant*, lauding the abstention of Tynesiders from eating slave-produced sugar, affords a tangible and concrete example of what can sometimes appear to be abstract notions of political campaigning (p. 27). Further material gleaned from local press, such as information about the Baptist Wars in Jamaica, is a significant addition to the scholarship on abolition in general (p. 64).

There were some points that raised queries. It is suggested, for example, that one of the most famous icons of abolition may have been designed by Thomas Bewick (p. 55). Most of the literature that this reviewer has encountered suggests that William Hackwood designed the original at the behest of his employer, Josiah Wedgwood. If new information contradicting this view has been unearthed by the project, then it needs to be highlighted more clearly. It is also important not to conflate abolitionism with political radicalism, the career of William Wilberforce being a case in point. Similarly it should be noted that, while he was a pious and committed Christian, Wilberforce was never an ordained cleric (p. 31).

Notwithstanding these minor points, this book is the fruit of strategic vision and a significant amount of hard work. It contributes in two crucial ways. First of all, it corrects a prevailing supposition that the economic focus of the North East was exclusively on the local, Baltic and North Sea economies. It is, however, much more than merely a record of the North East's involvement in the slave trade and its abolition. Many who took part in the bicentenary programme expressed a concern that the knowledge generated by the commemoration would be lost. John Charlton has ensured that this will not be the case here. This book records and preserves an important part of the history of the North East. It illustrates not just the power of local history, and the research into people that sustains it, but also what an important contribution this can make to a broader, global picture.

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