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East Anglia and the Abolition of the Slave Trade

©Jeremy Collingwood

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The year 2008 marked the bicentenary of the passing of the historic Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Between 1690 and 1807 it is estimated that some 11 million Africans were transported across the Atlantic as slaves. Of these some 2.8 millions were carried in British vessels. Some 450,000 are reckoned to have died aboard British ships. The nation, which was amongst the greediest and most successful of the Atlantic slavers, was also one of the first to put an end to this trade. Although it was the slaving ports of Bristol and Liverpool and London which featured most largely in the abolition campaign there are some interesting connections with East Anglia. These include:

Benjamin Lay (1681-1760) was born in Colchester and became one of the earliest Quaker abolitionists. As a young man he moved to Barbados and then to Abington in Pennsylvania. He was barely four feet tall and wore clothes made by himself. He was a hunchback with a projecting chest and arms almost longer than his legs. He would wear nothing, nor eat anything made from the loss of animal life or provided by any degree of slave labour. He was a zealous enemy of slavery and slave-owning and carried on a ceaseless campaign of tracts and stunts. On one occasion he burst into a meeting of Philadelphia's Quaker leaders and plunged a knife into his stomach, where he had hidden a hollowed-out Bible filled with red juice, which he then sprayed in the shocked faces of the slave owners as he accused them of having blood on their hands.

Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846) was born in Wisbech. He attended the Grammar School where his clergyman father was headmaster. He went on to St Paul's School in London and then to St John's College Cambridge, where William Wilberforce was also an undergraduate. Wilberforce was an idle student whereas Clarkson was very diligent. He won a Latin prize essay on the subject 'Is it lawful to enslave the unconsenting? Whilst riding on horseback between Cambridge and London, Clarkson had what

he called a spiritual revelation at Wadesmill near Ware. He subsequently wrote: 'A thought came into my mind that if the contents of the Essay were true, it was time some person should see these calamities to their end'. This experience caused him to devote his life to the abolition of the slave trade. He was the moral steam engine behind the abolitionists and one of the founding members of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787. Between 1787 and 1794 Clarkson travelled 35,000 miles visiting the slave ports and collecting the vital evidence to present to Wilberforce who led the Parliamentary campaign.

Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa 'The African' (1745-1797).

According to his own testimony, Equiano was born in the Ibo country of South Eastern Nigeria. He was taken prisoner at the age of ten years and sold to English slave traders. At the age of twelve years he was taken to the West Indies and then transported to Virginia. After a short time Equiano was sold to a visiting British naval officer called Michael Henry Pascal. He accompanied Pascal on many naval and military actions. Pascal renamed him Gustavus Vassa after the first Swedish king, and it was under that name that Equiano was baptised in 1759 in St Margaret's Church, Westminster. The baptismal certificate actually states that Gustavus Vassa was born in Carolina. At the end of the Seven Years War, Pascal retracted his promise to free Equiano, who was sold back into slavery. Eventually a Quaker merchant called Robert King did allow Equiano his freedom at the age of 21 years. After serving as an able bodied seaman, Equiano found his way to England where he became a hairdresser in London. He returned to sea from time to time and played a part in the resettlement of former slaves in Sierra Leone.

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Equiano's personal story, was published in 1789. It performed the dual role of being both a conversion testimony and a propaganda weapon against the evils of the slave trade. Equiano became an eloquent advocate of the cause and travelled widely on speaking engagements. At the time of publishing his book, Equiano was living in Westminster in London. But three years later Equiano appears in Soham in Cambridgeshire. The occasion was the marriage by special licence of Equiano to Susannah Cullen, a spinster of Soham. A newly unveiled plaque in St Andrew's Church, Soham, commemorates the marriage of Olaudah and Susannah on 7 April 1792. It must be presumed that the couple had met on one of Equiano's book tours. It has been suggested that Susannah came from the nearby village of Fordham, where Cullen or Collen is a well known local name.

It appears that Equiano and his wife took up residence in Soham. Their first daughter Anna Maria was born on 16 October 1793 and baptised at St Andrew's Soham on 30 January 1794. A second child, Joanna, was born on 11 April 1795, and was baptised in St Andrew's on 29 April 1795. Susanna herself died shortly afterwards on 21 February 1796, and is

buried in the Fordham Road Cemetery at Soham. Her gravestone reads 'Susanna Vassa, Wife of Gustavus the African, aged 34 years'.

Equiano moved back to London after the death of his wife. He died in Paddington Street, Middlesex, London, on 31 March 1797. The whereabouts of his grave is not known. Sadly his eldest daughter, Anna Maria, followed her mother and father closely to the grave. She died on 21 July 1797 and is buried in St Andrew's Church, Chesterton, where there is a commemorative plaque in her memory. This reads in part:

Should simple village rhymes attract thine eye,
Stranger, as thoughtfully thou passest by,
Know that there lies besides this humble stone
A child of colour haply not thine own.
Her father born of Afric's sun-burnt race,
Torn from his native field, ah foul disgrace:
Through various trials, at length to Britain came
Espoused, so Heaven ordain'd, an English dame,
And follow'd Christ; their hope two infants dear.
But one a hapless orphan, slumbers here.

The surviving daughter, Joanna, inherited a substantial estate from her father's literary earnings. She went on to marry the Reverend Henry Bromley, who became the minister of the Congregational Chapel in Clavering before moving to London in 1845.* Joanna died on 10 March 1857 and is buried at Abney Park Cemetery in Stoke Newington. Her husband, Henry, survived her for twenty years before being buried alongside her on 12 February 1878. It is not known if they had any children.

* Rev Henry Bromley was pastor at Clavering for 18 years from 1827 to 1845: a note about him in church records refers to Joanna: 'good progress made during his ministry, but his wife's health forced him to move to Harwich'.

NOTE: The information on Equiano is largely based on the Soham On-Line website: www.soham.org.uk/history/olaudahequiano.htm

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