

A Partial Timeline of British Slavery and Abolition
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Assigned Reading in Larger Green Font

1554-1555: Establishment of the English slave trade

1569: The case of Cartwright, arrested for battery against another man that he claimed was his slave, brought from Russia to England. The courts ruled against him:

“one Cartwright brought a Slave from Russia, and would scourge him, for which he was questioned; and it was resolved, That England was too pure an Air for Slaves to breath in. And indeed it was often resolved, even in Star-Chamber, That no Gentleman was to be whipt for any offence whatsoever; and his whipping was too severe.” (From a 1721 report of the 1569 case)

Eighteenth-Century: England at the center of the triangular slave trade [i.e. textiles rum, and goods sent to Africa from England; slaves acquired in Africa and sent to North America; Slave produced sugar, tobacco, and cotton sent to England]

1729: The Yorke-Talbot slavery opinion: in which the English courts declared that a slave’s status did not change when he came to England, and that Christian baptism did not change that status

1751 John Newton, A Slave Trader’s Journal

1763: Shanley v Harvey: The Lord Chancellor, Lord Henley, proclaims “As soon as a man sets foot on English ground he is free”

1779, John Newton, “Amazing Grace”

1771: R v Stapylton: In this case, the courts ruled against a slave owner (Stapylton), who had attempted to deport a man whom he claimed as a slave. Lewis was allowed to testify. No definitive statement about the status of slavery was made at this time. The sitting judge, Lord Mansfield, stated that “whether [slave owners] have this kind of property or not in England has never been solemnly determined”

1772: The Mansfield Judgment: Abolitionists issued a writ to release James Somersett, a slave confined on a ship from Virginia that was bound for Jamaica. The question now became one of an enslaved individual’s *rights* rather than those of the slave owner. Citing earlier judgments, Lord Mansfield ruled that a man held as a slave elsewhere could not be forced to leave England.

1773 Phillis Wheatley publishes her volume of poetry

1774 **John Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery* (abolitionist)**

1774: Joseph Knight vs. John Wedderburn. Joseph Knight, held as a slave sought his freedom in a court case against Wedderburn. The Scottish courts declared that Knight was a free man in Scotland, whose laws were more just than those in Jamaica.

1781: The Zong Incident, in which a British slave ship jettisons 133 slaves into the sea in order to collect insurance

1782 *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*

1785

Richard Price, from *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution*

1786 Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*

1787 **Formation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in London**

1787 Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*

1788-1792: **Period of intense abolitionist agitation led by Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, organized agitation on the part of Quakers and Non-Conformists**

1788: **Slave Trade Act of 1788, which restricted the number of people that could be transported on the slave ships; first act that attempted to regulate the slave trade at all**

1788 **John Newton, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*
Thomas Clarkson, *Impolicy of the Slave Trade*
Hannah More, *Slavery, a poem*
Ann Yearsley, *A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade*
William Roscoe, *The Wrongs of Africa*
Alexander Falconbridge, *Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*
William Cowper, “Sweet meant has Sour Sauce, or The Slave Trader in the Dumps”**

Nicholls, Observations occasioned by the Attempts Made in England to Effect the Abolition of Slavery

1788-1789

Wilberforce introduces evidence against the slave trade to Parliament, makes extensive use of investigative material compiled by abolitionists, including Falconbridge and Clarkson, attempting to get the slave trade outlawed entirely

1789

Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano

Wilberforce, “Speech to the House of Commons”

1790

William Blake, “The Little Black Boy”

1791

April 1791 William Wilberforce’s bill for Abolition is defeated

Anna Letitia Barbauld, “Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. on the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade”

August 1791 San Domingo slave and freed slaves agitate against planters and government

1792 Petition campaign for abolition; the House of Commons resolves on a principle of gradual abolition by 1796; struck down by the House of Lords. Abolitionists begin to boycott the consumption of sugar but abolition efforts are complicated by worsening conditions in France and the beginning of war with France

1793 Wilberforce’s second bill for abolition passed by the House of Commons but defeated in the Lords

1794 The French abolish slavery in their colonies

1795-1799 Commons repeatedly defeats bills of abolition

Coleridge lectures against the slave trade in Bristol

1799-1804 Low period of abolition agitation

1804 The House of Commons pass a general abolition bill but the House of Lords table the motion; abolition agitation increases again

1807 The Abolition of the Slave Trade but does not end colonial slavery

William Wilberforce, A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade

1808 Thomas Clarkson, *The History of Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Slave Trade by the British Parliament*

1809 Poems on the abolition of the slave trade

1811 Parliament makes slave trading a felony

1811-1823 Continuous agitation in England for international abolition of slavery

1823 Clarkson and Wilberforce found The Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions

1831 Massive slave revolt in Jamaica

1832 English Reform Bill, which enfranchised more of the British middle classes, but still left many working men without the vote, as well as all women

1833 Abolition of Colonial Slavery: allowed for gradual emancipation, forcing slaves to work as “apprentices” for six years; also compensated former owners

1838 Immediate Abolition Act: rescinded the apprenticeship clause