William Allen, one of the Pharmaceutical Society’s founders, was deeply involved in the campaign to end slavery, which led to the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 200 years ago this week. Briony Hudson, keeper of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society’s museum collections, writes:

On 25 February 1807, William Allen wrote in his diary: “The young men from my house came home from the House of Commons this morning, at five o’clock, and brought the glorious news that the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade passed the second reading.” The news was particularly glorious for Allen, who had been at the forefront of the anti-slavery movement for more than 20 years, and was to be involved in the cause for the rest of his life.

A month after the Bill’s second reading, Parliament passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. The Act to outlaw the slave trade throughout the British Empire and made it illegal for British ships to be involved in the trade. It marked the beginning of the end for the transatlantic traffic in human beings. Best estimates suggest that over more than 300 years, 10–12 million Africans were forcibly transported to North and South America and the Caribbean.

Much has been written about the life of William Allen (see Panel 2). He was the first member and first president of the Pharmaceutical Society, a philanthropist, a leading scientist, and a well-connected diplomat on behalf of his many causes. Allen was one of many Quaker opponents of the slave trade. He was horrified by the idea from an early age, writing, aged 20: “I think it may be safely asserted, and clearly proved, that those who enslave men, or are accessory to it, are neither moralists nor Christians; for we know, in the first place, that to drag innocent people from their native land, to consign them to slavery, to wear out their lives in continual hardships, is unjust.”

Much of the public opposition to slavery was presented through formal means. In 1783, William Allen signed the first petition against the slave trade organised by the Quaker Meeting for Sufferings. On 18 April 1791 Allen sat in the front row of the House of Commons while William Wilberforce (1759–1833) spoke for four hours to promote the anti-slavery cause. Wilberforce, the parliamentary activist for the anti-slavery movement, and Allen became great friends and worked together against slavery. In 1794, they became close friends from 1796 to the end of their lives, and are portrayed close to each other in Benjamin Robert Haydon’s depiction of the Anti-Slavery Society Convention in 1840, which is on display in the National Portrait Gallery in London. Clarkson used William Allen’s home as his own when he was in London.

Allen was one of many who made a personal response to slavery. He wrote on 22 February 1789: “When I reflect upon the tyranny and oppression exercised by my countrymen towards the poor Africans, and the many thousands yearly murdered in the disgraceful Slave Trade, I can but be a zealous opponent of slavery....as sugar is, undoubtedly, one of the chief commodities produced by slave labour, I resolve, through divine assistance, to persevere in the disuse of it until the Slave Trade shall be abolished.” He subsequently abstained from sugar until slavery was abolished in 1838, a period of nearly 45 years. An estimated 400,000 Britons took part in this boycott of sugar from the 1780s onwards.

However, the dilemma between personal ethics and commercial pragmatism was clearly a difficult one to resolve. A large number of businesses in Britain rested on a foundation of slave-produced products, and that included pharmacy. Although it is difficult to tie the evidence together, there seems little doubt that raw materials for pharmaceutical products were produced on plantations. Plantation-grown pharmaceutical ingredients included cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, ginger and, most importantly, sugar.

Allen began his pharmacy career in 1792, aged 22, when he became a clerk for Joseph Gurney, who ran a pharmacy in London. By 1797, Allen had established his own business in London. Clarkson used William Allen’s home as his own when he was in London. In 1795, Allen began his pharmacy career in 1792, aged 22, when he became a clerk for Joseph Gurney, who ran a pharmacy in London. By 1797, Allen had established his own business in London.

Allen joined the Committee for the Abolition of the African Slave Trade in 1805. Among its founders, in 1787, had been Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846), one of the foremost campaigners against slavery and the slave trade. He and Allen first worked together against slavery in 1794. They became great friends from 1796 to the end of their lives, and are portrayed close to each other in Benjamin Robert Haydon’s depiction of the Anti-Slavery Society Convention in 1840, which is on display in the National Portrait Gallery in London. Clarkson used William Allen’s home as his own when he was in London.

In 1805, Allen’s diary records that he “attended the committee for the abolition of the slave trade at Wilberforce’s house.” In the
the West Indies, where most of his customers were medical practitioners including those on plantations. The slave economy worried Bevan. He letters make frequent references to his hatred of “the man-trade”. He refused any security that involved a mortgage on slaves to the extent that when one of his customers in Jamaica offered to meet his debt by selling slaves, Bevan replied that he was prepared to wait longer for the money. In the 1780s he wrote: “The subject of slavery has at times, tho’ not immediately concerned, engaged much of my attention; and, as I think it is an evil that wants removing, I wish every man to look seriously about him & consider whether there is anything for him to do as an individual, to contribute towards its removal: as probably so great an affair will require the united effort of many; & if, as many think, it must be gradually abolished, let each of us deeply weigh what are the steps for us to take.”

In spite of his personal boycott, it seems that Allen's business was unable to separate itself completely from slave-produced commodities. The Society's archive includes a stock book for W. Allen and Co. for the years 1810 and 1811. In both years, the annual stock-check reveals holdings of “double-refined sugar” (sacharum purificat [sic]), and of more than 20 medicinal syrups alongside other spices. His record alone cannot confirm the origin of this sugar. However, it seems possible that, at least for the pharmaceutical business, Allen had no choice but to buy West Indian sugar from slave plantations.

After 1807, Allen continued to work hard to improve the situation for slaves. He had been involved with the Sierra Leone Company, which had established the colony as a homeland for freed slaves in 1787. The colony was handed over to the British Crown in 1807. He then became a founder member and a director of the African Institution, the successor body to the Sierra Leone Company. The institution was formed to foster new trading links with Africa to replace the old slave trade. Luke Howard (1772–1864), another well-known Quaker pharmacist, and Allen's business partner from 1796, was also involved in this attempt to provide a better future beyond the slave trade ban. In 1814, Allen played a part in establishing “A Society for the purpose of Encouraging the Black Settlers at Sierra Leone, and the Natives of Africa generally, in the Cultivation of their Soil, by the Sale of their Produce.” The aim of the society was to stimulate industry in Africa. Allen wrote in his journal on 27 December 1813: “MUCH taken up, day after day, with examining witnesses on the state of Sierra Leone, before a committee of the African Institution. I feel it a duty to stand by the poor black settlers — they have few to take their part.”

The African Institution as a body, and Allen in particular, supported Paul Cuffee, an African man who had been a slave in Massachusetts. Cuffee had managed to buy his freedom and come to London as owner of two vessels. He applied to work with the Quakers and planned with the African Institution to travel to Sierra Leone and try to improve conditions there. Allen met Cuffee a number of times while he was in London and pronounced him a man “of great experience as well as integrity”. When Cuffee left for Sierra Leone in 1815, Allen got together seeds and other goods for him, and presented him with a telescope. Allen also corresponded with John Kizell, a native of Sierra Leone, and sent him seed and books.

In the 1840s, when Allen learnt that a West Indian boy brought to London by a ship’s captain was being maltreated, he had the boy taken to his house, paid for his schooling and took him into service. “Black Tom” still lived at Allen’s home in Lindfield, Sussex, in the 1850s. Allen's strong connections in the political world both nationally and internationally meant that he acted as an important advocate for the anti-slavery cause. It was Allen who, when Wilberforce asked to write to the Privy Council to seek permission for a licence to trade with Sierra Leone. In 1815, Allen called on Nicholas Vansittart, Chancellor of the Exchequer, to talk about the possibility of improving British trade with Sierra Leone. The government again in 1817 to discuss promoting production of rice and cotton mills for Sierra Leone. In 1822, Allen attended a congress in Verona to lobby for abolition of slavery. Here he met Tar Alexander I of Russia to present letters from Wilberforce and Clarkson. He urged the emperor to take the lead at the congress in getting the slave trade banned as piracy. He also met the Duke of Wellington, who was representing Britain at the congress, and advised him on a paper on the issue.

The abolitionists’ primary concern was the impotence of unilateral British action. However, in spite of Allen’s efforts, the French did not abolish slavery until 1848, and it was not abolished in the Dutch colonies until 1861. The British Parliament had finally abolished slavery itself on 1 August 1838. Allen wrote in his diary: “A day of jubilee. Eight hundred thousand of our fellow creatures released from slavery this day, in our West India Islands. My spirit is clothed with thankfulness.”

This was not the end of Allen’s involvement with moral issues of race and subjugation. Indefatigable as ever, he took the opportunity to get involved in the Aborigines Committee, established in 1833 to protect the “Hottentots” against the “Boors” in South Africa. He continued his involvement when in 1840 the society extended its concerns to New Zealand.

Further reading