

# William Allen: anti-slavery campaigner

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 outlawed 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 (see Panel 1).

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 to 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 near and dear connections and 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 even though their religious beliefs were in opposition. The evangelical Wilberforce wrote: "I wish your religious principles and my own were more entirely accordant." They came into contact in other areas of proposed reform, including the British and Foreign Bible School Society, the Distressed Manufacturers, the Association for the Relief and Benefit of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor, and the penal reform movement.

In 1806, Allen's diary records that he "attended the committee for the abolition of the slave trade at Wilberforce's house". In the



William Allen by Henry Perronet Briggs (oil on canvas, 1844)

same year, he wrote letters of support for Wilberforce, who was in danger of losing his seat as Member of Parliament for the county of Yorkshire.

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.

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 opposer 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 Bevan at the Plough Court pharmacy established by Sylvanus Bevan in 1715. The bulk of Joseph Bevan's drugs trade was with

## Panel 1: Significant dates in the slave trade

1562	First English slaving expedition by Sir John Hawkins.	1807	Bill for Abolition of the Slave Trade passed on 25 March. British captains who were caught continuing the trade were fined £100 (equivalent to about £5,000 today) for every slave found on board.
1619	First record of Africans landed in Virginia.	1808	British West Africa Squadron established as part of the Royal Navy to suppress slave trading.
1625	First English settlement on Barbados.	1815	Congress of Vienna. Britain puts pressure on France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain to abolish the slave trade.
1626	First boatload of African slaves to St Kitts.	1833	Slavery Abolition Act passed.
1655	British capture of Jamaica.	1838	Full emancipation for slaves in the British Empire from 1 August after a period of forced apprenticeship under the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.
1672	Royal Africa Company granted charter to carry Africans to the Americas.	1848	Emancipation of slaves by the French.
1760	British Quakers banned slave trading among their followers.	1865	Slavery abolished in US territories.
1778	Slavery declared illegal in Scotland.	1888	Slavery abolished in Brazil.
1783	Committee on the Slave Trade established by Quakers' Meeting for Sufferings.		
1787	Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade founded.		
1792	Resolution for gradual abolition of the slave trade defeated in House of Lords.		
1805	Bill for Abolition passed in the House of Commons, but rejected in the Lords.		

the West Indies, where most of his customers were medical practitioners, including those on plantations. The slave economy worried Bevan. His 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.”

Allen too refused to support the slave trade through his business. In 1814, he declined to refit a large sea chest, having investigated the buyer’s occupation and found it was connected to the slave trade: “When a man comes and says, I want a supply of articles for the purpose of buying slaves or where we have every reason to believe that things are wanted for that purpose, they cannot be supplied without a degree of participation in the guilt. . .”

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 William Allen and Company 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. This 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 rely on 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 from 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

## Panel 2: Significant dates in the life of William Allen

1770	Born in Spitalfields, London.	1808	Founder member of Society for Diminishing Capital Punishment.
1784	Apprenticed to father’s business.	1810	Appointed clerk to the Quaker Meetings for Sufferings.
1792	Started work as a clerk at Plough Court working for Joseph Gurney Bevan.	1811	Started <i>The Philanthropist</i> , a monthly magazine which he edited until 1818.
1794	Formed a partnership with Samuel Mildred on Bevan’s retirement.	1814	Elected member of council of Royal Society. Involved with Robert Owen in establishment of New Lanark Settlement.
1796	Married Mary Hamilton of Redruth, Cornwall.	1816	Charlotte died during a visit to Geneva.
1797	Mary died after giving birth to a daughter, also called Mary. Allen bought Mildred out of the Plough Court business and went into partnership with Luke Howard.	1820	Became a Quaker minister.
1802	Appointed to teach chemistry and experimental philosophy at Guy’s Hospital, which he continued until 1826.	1822	Daughter Mary married Cornelius Hanbury.
1803	Lectured at the Royal Institution, until 1810. Elected president of Physical Society at Guy’s.	1823	Mary died following the birth of a son, William Allen Hanbury.
1804	Appointed an honorary member of the Board of Agriculture. Gave series of lectures on natural philosophy at Royal Institution.	1824	Allen’s company became Allen, Hanburys & Barry.
1806	Married Charlotte Hanbury.	1825	Establishment of School of Industry and Boarding School in Lindfield, Sussex.
1807	Involved in setting up of Geological Society. Elected fellow of the Royal Society. Allen and Howard’s partnership wound up.	1826	Married Grisell Birkbeck.
		1835	Grisell died.
		1841	Moved the resolution at the Crown and Anchor to establish the Pharmaceutical Society. Appointed President of Society.
		1843	Died on 30 December.

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 came 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 mistreated, 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 whom 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. They met 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. There he met Tsar 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 1838 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

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