

# set all free: ACT TO ABOLISH SLAVERY

*An anecdotal account of Bill Snelson's sabbatical in 2005*

**2007 sees the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act.** The Act was the result of the campaigning of abolitionists, many of whom were motivated by Christian convictions: Thomas Clarkson, John Newton and William Wilberforce are the best known; and there were others in the group of 'evangelical' Christians making up the Clapham Sect. Freed slaves, such as Ottobah Cugoana and Oluadah Equiano, played their part. (The latter's *The Interesting Narrative* is an easily-accessible and fascinating paperback.)

Churches Together in England (CTE) was asked by several sources to highlight the bicentenary of an Act which was a tremendous achievement and the culmination of a generation's lobbying against high odds and many vested interests. Only in the 1830s was slavery (rather than the 'respectable trade') abolished in the British Empire, and not until 1865 in the United States.

A grant for the Sainsbury Family Trusts (the Jerusalem Trust) enabled CTE to build a project and to employ a Project Director, Richard Reddie, a Bradfordian with Jamaican roots who had previously worked with hard-to-reach Black young people.

Against this background, and having been at CTE for seven years, I had the opportunity of a sabbatical. Predictions of a hot summer and hurricanes meant that Beryl and I opted to take the available three months in three parts: ten days in the Caribbean in May, reading at home in July and August, along with a trip to France to visit La Rochelle and Nantes, and a fortnight on the Eastern seaboard of the USA in October. To this we added visits to Liverpool, Bristol, Wisbech, and the National Maritime Museum. Other sites would be worth seeing, but time and finance were and are limited.

The initial aim was to learn more about the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery: what developed also was the discovery of how different places are dealing with their history, telling or not telling the story. As with most people of our generation, our knowledge was slight; we had been brought up on a view of Empire and Commonwealth largely informed by beautiful postage stamps and an exotic procession at the Coronation.

Our overall impression is how small an amount of historic artefacts remain from a trade which saw between 12 and 20 million people shipped as inhuman cargo from Africa to the Caribbean and Americas. We are conscious, too, that the involvement in the slave trade extended into places, industries and commercial undertakings far beyond where we visited. Indeed, slavery was the foundation of the C18<sup>th</sup> economy, just as it remains to this day one of the causes of the condition of Africa and the African Diaspora. Overall, too, we found little attempt to link the past with the present, or to acknowledge the Christian motivation in the reformers.



Reproduction of Slave Ship, Bristol Museum

We visited **Bristol** on my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in March, and **Liverpool** in April. We found the museums in both places were informative, evocative and challenging. No one could go through them unmoved. Both cities, too, have 'slavery trails' so that it is possible to see the results of the wealth generated by the trade in mansions and public buildings. In St Mary, Redcliffe, Bristol we discovered this statement: "During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Redcliffe and Bristol grew wealthy by trading weapons, textiles, iron goods and slaves for tobacco, cocoa, and sugar from the West Indies. Edward Colston, who gave Bristol many amenities, earned most of his wealth from his slave plantations. Church communities like all human institutions can be imperfect. It is well

for each generation to examine its activities and values." Bristol Cathedral has a window in memory of Colston, along with a host of monuments to people who were born in, or died in, Barbados.

Liverpool Parish Church was razed to the ground in World War II, so there are no similar monuments; and both Cathedrals are works of the C20<sup>th</sup>. But Liverpool is working hard to honour its history and to develop links in both Africa and America.

On the first day in our May visit to **Antigua** we encountered Redcliffe Quay, the area where slaves were landed in the capital, St Johns. It's now a renovated, gentrified area geared up to welcoming the cruise ships and offering the finest of designer goods. They are not on offer on Sundays - the day of rest is reserved for church-going: and we attended Methodist and Anglican services which were redolent of our childhood and of a culture long-gone in England.

Antigua's national museum had a small section on slavery, but with no attempt to relate it to present day life. We sought out the Nathaniel Gilbert Centre, having heard the story that Gilbert, then the Speaker of the Antiguan Assembly, had been converted by John Wesley in England, and on his return to Antigua had preached to his slaves (though not emancipating them) and thereby had become the founder of Methodism in the Americas.

A restoration project provides the most information about slavery: Betty's Hope, in ruins now, had been one of the most efficient large-scale sugar estates in Antigua, and in the ownership of the Codrington family from 1674 to 1944. Outlines of the Great House, Curing House, Boiling House and Still remain, along with a sophisticated cistern complex and an imposing mill.

Nelson's dockyard, the reconstructed Georgian haven, was evocative and revealing. In the Museum, a notice in the bellows read "According to Sammy Smith in his memoirs, the dockyard had the best slave for branding shop in Antigua. 'My mother said they never lost a slave for branding here.'"

**Barbados** welcomed us with banners about 2007. News of the bicentenary had preceded us, we thought excitedly, until we realised the reference was to the World Cricket Cup to be played that year in the Caribbean. One of our places to visit was the National Museum: it was closed for a week for hurricane training, but we managed to talk our way in, to find a remarkably small display about the history of slavery. We looked in the main bookshop in Bridgetown, and were surprised by the absence of material. Plantation houses, too, spoke of the wealth and luxurious living of their owners, but never said how the wealth had been generated. The folk museum at a rum factory described life from the 1850s to the present.

Codrington College, the oldest Anglican theological college in the Western Hemisphere, was built in 1743 after Christopher Codrington had bequeathed the estate and considerable money at his death in 1710. Unfortunately its Principal was moving house in readiness from his retirement, and the day we called we managed only a brief conversation about the college's links with slave ownership.

The many Anglican churches would not be out of place in an English village. They abound in memorials to civil servants and plantation owners, and to clergy some of whom survived only a few weeks on the island. "Barbados is still a very religious country with over 100 existing religions", we read on a plaque by the Barbadian National Trust. "The bulk of the early white settlers were Anglicans and this became the faith of most Black Barbadians." We were aware particularly of Moravians and Methodists, and of the myriad of independent Pentecostal churches the same size as the adjacent chattel houses.

In August we drove to **Nantes** and **La Rochelle**, the two major slave trading ports of France. The Office de Tourisme of neither place could tell us anything about slavery. In Nantes, the Michelin Green Guide directed us to the Musée in the Château des Ducs de Bretagne: it should be excellent when it reopens after renovations in the autumn of 2006. In Nantes Cathedral, among an exhibition on the history of the city, we found this: "The Church tried to humanise the treatment of slaves...The system itself was condemnable, and the Christians of the C18th did not condemn it. The historical context may explain the silence; it can never excuse it."



The Saphir, La Rochelle Cathedral

La Rochelle's Cathedral has no explicit references. In a side chapel, however, there are *ex voto* paintings, in gratitude for safe deliverance of the ships, and a painting of The Saphir, becalmed in the doldrums, with slaves on deck praying for wind (1741).

La Rochelle's Museum of the New World was open; slavery is one part of it, American/ Canadian Indian history is the other. The abolition movement in France, and in Britain, is well-presented and Thomas Clarkson gets honourable mention.

Following the Clarkson footsteps, we made the rather less glamorous journey to **Wisbech**, his birthplace, in September. The unassuming local museum has some important material, notably Clarkson's travelling chest – a portable exhibition of the evil impedimenta of the slave trade, and more positively a portrayal of African culture and achievement.

We spent the last fortnight in October in the USA. First stop was **Harper's Ferry, West Virginia**, where John Brown (he whose body lies a'mouldering in the grave) led the attack on the federal arsenal which was the precursor to the American Civil War. An excellent museum with a range of teaching and display methods animates the story, and also places what happened within a context of movements of democratic protest up to the present day.



John Brown Museum, Harpers Ferry

South to Thomas Jefferson's plantation house at **Monticello, North Carolina**. Jefferson detested slavery, but was a slave owner whose personal finances were so precarious that he could not free them. We went on a good African-American tour - not a tour, our guide told us, which has many African-American visitors.



South again to the Moravian settlement of **Old Salem**. The Moravians kept slaves; white and Black worshipped together until the 1820s when a separate log chapel was built by the slaves for themselves. Now it is a museum, which tells the story of the transatlantic trade well and movingly, the Moravians' complicity in the owner-ship of slaves is fully acknowledged.

**Shirley Plantation**, in cotton fields not far from Williamsburg, is described as "America's oldest family business". Its kitchen, set well away from the main house, is a reminder that such was the danger of fires that life expectancy of kitchen staff was far lower than for other slaves. Overall, its dependence on slavery is not spelt out.



Shirley Plantation, Cotton Harvest 2005

**Washington** delighted us. Yet amid the centrality of the Declaration of Independence of 1776, we were uncertain that the United States lived up to the statement "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Equality of the races, equality of opportunity, appeared illusory; and the people we met on buses, the subway, in hotels or restaurants, seemed ill at ease with the state of their nation.



Slave Memorial. Mount Vernon

Approaching the ‘fall’, the part of the nation we saw was very beautiful, and nowhere moreso than George Washington’s home, **Mount Vernon**, over-looking the Potomac River. At the age of 11 Washington inherited 500 acres and 10 slaves; at the time of his death there were 316 slaves living on his estate. His unease about slavery had to be reconciled with a *real politique* that outright opposition would have split the Union. His will provided for the slaves to be freed upon the death of his wife. Close to Washington’s Mausoleum is a memorial to the slaves. An African-American tour tells the story and includes the 200-year-old slave quarters.

**Savannah, Georgia** was our southern-most destination. Its riverside was redolent of the import of slaves and the export of the cotton, the world price of which was determined in the Savannah Exchange. The First African Baptist Church, built by slaves in their ‘spare time’ after the long working day, held evidence of where runaways fleeing north in hope of a life of freedom had been sheltered as part of the so-called “Underground railroad”. General Oglethorpe, frequently mentioned in Savannah as the founder of Georgia, had lived in Godalming in a house which in the 1970s was an epileptic home where I used to take services when I was a curate.



First African Church, Savannah

**Charleston, South Carolina** continues as a witness to the wealth created by industries sustained by slavery. It was the major port of entry for slaves; and slave market buildings (only built in 1859) remain. Along the Ashley River are the plantations which tell the history of the “Carolina gold”, the rice produced in the mosquito-infected swamps. Artefacts in the city Museum are few.



African American Museum, Williamsburg

North to the antebellum restored **Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia**. The African American Religion Museum tells an honest story of the Churches’ involvement in slavery, its campaigning against slavery and its ministry to slaves. The ironies are recorded: such as the great evangelical preacher George Whitefield, who wrote vehemently in the 1840s against the possession of slaves yet in the 1850s held some himself.

Though what we saw in the United States indicated that the African-American history was in many places being honoured, we encountered very few efforts to look at the legacies of slavery, in terms either of accumulated wealth or of insurmountable deprivation. There was little about abolitionists, and so little about their values and motivation.

And we saw (apart from at Harper’s Ferry) no attempt to relate to contemporary campaigning issues or the immoral and exploitative trades of today.

This is just a sample of the international background. The West Coast of Africa, Jamaica or South America may tell different or corroborative stories. What is apparent is that there is much to be done to **set all free**, to tell the truth and to heal the wounds. The CTE Project is itself hampered by lack of resources, though we live in faint hope that a charity or institution will recognise the value of the Project.



Liverpool Maritime Museum (note that there’s a church in the background)