

October in the UK is being marked as “Black History month”. There have been numerous TV programmes dedicated to aspects of this subject.

Coverage has been augmented by “News” coverage of the now international ‘Black Lives Matter’ protest/movement, following the death in Minnesota of 46 year old George Floyd while in police custody.

We have also witnessed the examination of our own country’s past in the slave trade – the pulling down of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol and the renaming of the Colston Hall; the protective boarding erected around the statue of Robert Baden Powell on Poole quay following racist accusations; the realisation that many fine civic buildings throughout the country were built on the profits of this trade.

John Wesley had a direct experience of slavery during his time in the Colony of Georgia (1736-37).

His first action, which may be seen as anti-slavery, took place as he sailed back to Britain - according to his journals he taught an African to read and write during the voyage.

During his life John Wesley spoke out vehemently against the slavery trade and against slavery itself, repeatedly referring to the slave trade as the “*execrable sum of all villainies*”.

In 1774 he wrote his influential “*Thoughts Upon Slavery.*”

In August 1787 he wrote to the Abolition committee expressing his support and vowing to reprint his pamphlet “Thoughts Upon Slavery”, although this did not happen until the year after he died.

John Wesley died on the 2nd March 1791. From his death-bed, Wesley wrote to William Wilberforce on February 24th:

Dear Sir:

Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as *Athanasius contra mundum* (Athanasius against the world), I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils.

But if God be for you, who can be against you?

Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing!

Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.

Reading this morning a tract wrote by a poor African, I was particularly struck by that circumstance that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a "law" in our colonies that the oath of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this?

That he who has guided you from youth up may continue to strengthen you in this and all things, is the prayer of, dear sir,

Your affectionate servant,

John Wesley



The “tract” to which Wesley refers was written by a former slave, Gustavus Vassa, who was born in 1745 in Africa, kidnapped and sold for a slave in Barbados. In 1757 he was sent to England and, according to church records, was soon converted to Christianity.

John Wesley did not of course live to see slavery abolished – the first step; in 1807; was the Slavery Trade Act which outlawed the transport of slaves (British ships were profitably involved, sailing the ‘golden triangle’).

It was not until the 28th August 1833 that the Act of Parliament abolishing slavery in the Colonies received the royal assent.

William Wilberforce became one of the leaders of the ‘abolitionist movement’. One of his mentors was John Newton – former slave trader, turned Anglican priest. William Wilberforce, like Wesley, did not see abolition of slavery in the Colonies – he died on 29th July 1833, a month before the royal assent.