

On the vine

A Longer Read: William Wilberforce, My Ancestor

Recently, this reflection by our Director of Communications Carole Peters-King on her ancestor William Wilberforce was published, and we thought you might like to read it.

In a recent Midweek Message I mentioned that my 5 times (I think) Great Grandfather was William Wilberforce and how proud I was of that heritage.

The connection is on my paternal Grandmother's side of the family and my Father remembered the house he grew up in on Clapham Common, proudly displaying a collection of William's pipes and watches in a cabinet in the front sitting room. Sadly, in the 1950s the house was converted into flats and rented out, and much of the furniture was stored in the attic. It must have been too much of a temptation to one set of tenants, who cleared the attic along with their flat when they left.

As a family we may have lost some physical connections with William, but his legacy, as a deeply religious social reformer who was very influential in the abolition of the slave trade and eventually slavery itself in the British Empire, continues to make us proud.

William was born on 24 August 1759 in Hull. The son of a wealthy merchant, he went to Cambridge University where he met and began a lasting friendship with the future prime minister, William Pitt the Younger. No doubt influenced by this friendship, in 1780 - aged just 21 - William became the MP for Hull, later representing the whole of Yorkshire.

Reports say that he had led a rather dissolute life, but this changed completely when he became an evangelical Christian, and in 1790 he joined a leading group known as the Clapham Sect, named after their meeting site.

One man who had an enormous influence on William and the Clapham Sect was the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. William was persuaded to lobby for the abolition of the slave trade, and for 18 years he regularly introduced anti-slavery motions in parliament.

All the same, it wasn't until 1807 that the slave trade was finally abolished. And it took another 26 years of continual campaigning before an Act of Parliament was passed that gave freedom to all slaves in the British Empire.

William fought poverty as well as slavery.

His Christian faith prompted him to become interested in social reform, particularly the improvement of factory conditions in Britain. He worked with the reformer Hannah More to provide all children with regular education in reading, personal hygiene and religion.

He was also closely involved with the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (another thing we have in common) and was instrumental in encouraging Christian missionaries to go to India.

William finally retired from politics in 1825 and died on 29 July 1833, shortly after he had seen the act to free slaves in the British Empire passed through the House of Commons.

He is buried near his friend Pitt in Westminster Abbey. I have visited his grave on more than one occasion along with his wax replica at Madam Tussauds, which incidentally bears a striking resemblance to my Grandmother.

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