

William Wilberforce: A Biography

Have you ever had to fight for something you believe in? Maybe you have been a representative for the School Council and had to persuade your teachers to make some changes. William Wilberforce spent his life working hard to make important changes in British law. His biggest achievement was his role in the abolishment of the British slave trade in 1807.

Did you know?

William Wilberforce used his role in parliament to help lots of people, and animals too! He supported British missionary work in India, the Church Mission Society and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.



William Wilberforce (24 August 1759 – 29 July 1833)

Childhood

William Wilberforce was born in 1759 in Hull, East Yorkshire. As a child, Wilberforce's family were rich merchants. They brought goods, such as wood and cloth, back to Britain to trade. Sadly, when he was only eight, his father died and his mother became ill. Wilberforce had to leave his home to go live with his aunt and uncle. Although he did not want to leave his mother, he was excited to go to London because he had never been before. Wilberforce began going to church every week because his aunt and uncle were very religious. When his mother was better, he went back home but continued to believe in God and read the Bible on a regular basis.

Becoming a Member of Parliament

At the age of 17, Wilberforce enrolled at Cambridge university. He met a new friend called William Pitt, who would eventually become Prime Minister. They were friends because they both liked to help people. They decided to work in parliament so they could use their public roles to share information and change laws to help people. Wilberforce became a Member of Parliament (MP) for Hull in 1780, aged 21.

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John Newton was a religious friend of Wilberforce's. He told him stories about people who were brought to Britain and were used as slaves. Wilberforce learnt about how these slaves were treated. They had to work very hard and were not looked after by the people who bought them. This kind of trade was very different from the cloth and wood his parents used to deal in! Learning about this type of trade made Wilberforce deeply upset so he decided to use his job, as an MP, to share these stories about how awful slaves' lives were. He, and his friends, hoped this would lead to a change in the law; abolishing the slave trade in Britain for good.



Wilberforce's achievements

Wilberforce began his campaign for the abolition of the Slave Trade in Britain, four years after he became an MP. Because some people were making lots of money through buying and selling (trading) slaves, they were against the passing of this law. It took 18 years for the law to be changed, but in 1807 The Slave Trade Act was finally introduced.

Even after this act was introduced, it did not help the slaves who were already in Britain. It took a further 26 years before freedom was granted to all of the slaves in the British Empire in 1833, following the Slavery Abolition Act. Sadly, William Wilberforce died on 29th July 1833, just a few days after the Slavery Abolition Act was passed through the House of Commons, on its way to becoming part of the law.

Wilberforce married late in life to Barbara Ann Spooner. Over 10 years, they had 6 children. He is buried in Westminster Abbey, near to his good friend, William Pitt.

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Comprehension

In which year was William Wilberforce born?

What was William's biggest achievement?

What changed for William when he was eight? Give examples from the text to support your answer.

Who influenced William's religion from an early age?

Why should a biography be set out in chronological (time) order?

Why did William want to work in parliament?

Explain what life was like for a slave living in Britain.

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Comprehension

What sort of person do you think John Newton was?

Why did some people not want to abolish the slave trade in Britain?

In the text, it says that the Slave Trade Act (1807) did not help the existing slaves in Britain. How were they eventually helped?

How else did William Wilberforce help others?

If you could change something for the better, what would it be and why?
