

HOMEWORK HELPSHEET / REVISION FILE

THE END OF THE SLAVE TRADE

KP10

BACKGROUND

It took twenty years of campaigning, from 1787 until 1807, before the slave trade was finally abolished. In 1792, Wilberforce gained House of Commons support for a Bill that would gradually end the trade but no timetable was agreed for abolition. Again in 1793 Wilberforce reintroduced his Bill but this time it was blocked. Britain was now at war with France and Parliament was worried about the spread of revolution. In 1792 the French Assembly abolished slavery and abolition became associated with revolutionary ideas from France. Many MPs believed that it would not be a good idea to abolish slavery while Britain was at war. It was thought that the profits from the slave trade were needed to pay for the war and that the slave trade provided sailors for the Royal Navy. It was argued that the French might take over the slave trade if Britain abolished it. The slave revolt on the French island of Haiti led to the slaughter of white planters and the freed slaves set up an independent state. The army of ex-slaves on Haiti led by Toussaint L'Ouverture defeated the French, Spanish and British forces and there was concern that they would set free the slaves on other Caribbean islands. Abolition of the slave trade might encourage slaves in the British West Indies to rebel. Despite these setbacks Wilberforce introduced a Bill for the abolition of the slave trade every year until he was finally successful in 1807.

The 1807 ACT FOR THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE

- It became illegal for British subjects to buy or sell slaves.
- British ships were forbidden to carry slaves.
- Ships carrying slaves could be confiscated if caught.
- The Royal navy was given powers to stop and search any ship suspected of carrying slaves.
- Individuals who were caught had to pay a fine of £100 – around £5,000 in today's money.
- British merchants and ship owners could be fined £100 for each slave found on their ships.
- Insurance of slave ships was forbidden - companies who disobeyed were heavily fined.
- Repeat offences could lead to imprisonment or transportation.

WHY THE SLAVE TRADE WAS ABOLISHED

- Abolitionists got public support by a brilliant propaganda and publicity campaign.
- They were successful in persuading many people not to buy sugar produced by slave labour.
- They were able to persuade a majority of MPs to vote for the abolition of the slave trade.
- Wilberforce was very persistent and his Bill abolishing the slave trade became law in 1807.
- Abolitionists attacked the slave trade and not all slavery - this would have been more difficult.
- Most religious groups and churches in Britain were against the slave trade.
- In 1776 after the American War of Independence Britain lost her North American trade in slaves.
- More of Britain's trade was with India and the Far East
- By 1807 British industry had new markets and the slave trade was not so important.
- Sugar from Brazil and India was cheaper than slave-produced sugar from the West Indies.
- During the war against France Britain gained more islands in the Caribbean and plantation owners did not want competition from new plantations.
- Abolition of the slave trade gave the British navy an excuse to stop ships from other countries and confiscate their cargoes and the ships.
- The high death rate of Africans led to a big fall in population on slave islands compared to areas where Africans were free.