

# Wilberforce



William Wilberforce (1759-1833) was an abolitionist. His father died when Wilberforce was nine, and his mother sent him to be brought up by his aunt and uncle.

He went to Cambridge University and moved into politics alongside his friend William Pitt. Wilberforce was elected to Parliament in September 1780 aged 21.

Wilberforce became a Christian while on a European tour in 1784 with his friend Isaac Milner. He contemplated leaving politics to become a minister, but Pitt and John Newton (writer of the hymn 'Amazing Grace') convinced him to serve God through politics.

After a period of contemplation and prayer, Wilberforce set his mind on what he believed God was calling him to: the suppression of the slave trade. This was not a popular cause and Wilberforce became the victim of assassination threats and lies. Despite these difficulties, Wilberforce proposed a bill in the House of Commons in 1793 regarding abolition which failed. He submitted Bill after Bill, year after year and was continually defeated.

Wilberforce kept working on changing the law regarding slaves, but also put his energies into philanthropy. He was a member of nearly 70 voluntary societies, and also supported church work and mission. He gave financial help to organisations including reforming hospital care and refugees.

His passion to end slavery never went away and he continued to work hard for over 20 years on the matter. In February 1807 the tide had finally turned and the House of Commons gave Wilberforce an ovation for his work. On Feb 23rd 1807 the slave trade was abolished by a vote of 283 to 16. Wilberforce continued to lobby in other countries for the next 25 years, and three days before his death in 1833 he learned that the law had been passed to abolish all slavery in the British Empire.

## Why Wilberforce?

We see in Wilberforce how faith can change someone personally – how it transformed Wilberforce's life and gave him purpose. We see the importance of study and hard work, and how change needs to be played out ultimately through the systems of law and government in which we live. In the story of Wilberforce, we can learn that sometimes we can fail, but if we keep trying, then we will succeed. Wilberforce inspires us to look at today's world and act for good where we are. In particular, we think about the plight of those less fortunate than ourselves: the poor, refugees, modern slaves who are invisible in society. Wilberforce inspires us to take action.