

Anti-Slavery in Hitchin and North Herts

Introduction

Hitchin has a long history of its residents standing up against slavery. This is partly because of the unusually large number of Quakers in the town, as Quakers have long campaigned against injustice, and especially slavery. The townspeople formed an early Anti-Slavery Society, and there is evidence for black people living here by 1840. Hitchin was not the only place where people were concerned about the injustice of slavery, with the Royston lawyer Joseph Beldam giving his services to the movement.

Quakers and Abolition

As early as 1779, the Hitchin Quakers paid a W Forster £25 'towards obtaining information for the abolition of the Slave Trade' and later raised money 'for the support of fugitive slaves'. Hitchin Baptists and Anglicans also joined the nineteenth-century fight to give slaves their freedom.

Quaker schoolgirl Phebe Lucas, who lived at the bottom of Sun Street in the 1820s, remembered how her aunt and uncle (Phebe and Samuel Allen, who had a water mill at West Mill) gave up sugar on principle, as it was one of the main products of the slave trade. They were almost certainly influenced by a poem published in 1788 by Berkhamsted-born William Cowper, called '*Pity for Poor Africans*', which began:

I own I am shocked at the purchase of slaves,
And fear that those who buy them and sell them are knaves,
What I hear of their hardships, their tortures and groans
Is almost enough to draw pity from stones.

I pity them greatly, but I must be mum,
For how could we do without sugar and rum?
Especially sugar, so needful we see?
What? Give up our desserts, our coffee, and tea!

A similar poem, specifically for children, was '*The Black Man's Lament; or, How to make Sugar*', by Amelia Opie, published in 1826. This gave a blow by blow account of the operation of a sugar plantation, complete with hand-coloured illustrations, showing slaves being transported, working on the plantations and being whipped.

Thanks to these anti-slavery books, many families, especially Quaker ones, boycotted sugar. Phebe remembered how her aunt's gooseberry and apple puddings had a 'peculiar flavour' because they were sweetened with honey rather than sugar. Phebe's aunt also made her learn lines by heart on slavery from another William Cowper poem *The Task*, which calls slavery 'human nature's broadest, foulest blot', and includes lines such as 'I had much rather be myself the slave, And wear the bonds than fasten them on him'. When her uncle Samuel Allen died in 1868, he was mentioned in a national magazine, *The Christian World* as the oldest member of the Anti-Slavery Society. His sons William and Stafford were also mentioned, as well-known opponents of slavery.



Illustration from *The Black Man's Lament*, Amelia Opie, 1826

The Hitchin Anti-Slavery Society

In December 1825 there was a meeting in Hitchin to form a Hitchin Anti-Slavery Society, with the Vicar Henry Wiles as Chairman. This new society was linked to the main London Anti-Slavery Society, to distribute their pamphlets and raise money for their cause. The following month, January 1826, the Hitchin society drew up a petition to the House of Commons 'for the mitigation and final abolition of slavery', which begins with the words: 'That your petitioners cannot contemplate without the deepest commiseration, the wretched condition of more than 800,000 of their fellow-subjects in the West Indian Colonies, still groaning under the heavy and degrading yoke of slavery.' (*The County Chronicle*, 24 January 1826, in Herts County Archives)

THE Committee of the Hitchin Anti-Slavery Society solicit the attention of their friends and neighbours, to the details contained in the following Speech of Mr. CLARKSON, delivered at a Meeting held at Ipswich, on the 22nd of April, for the purpose of Petitioning the British Legislature on the subject of Slavery. A Petition on the same subject, prepared by the above Committee, will be shortly handed about for signatures, in this town and its vicinity.

Hitchin, May 12th, 1828.

Detail from a Hitchin Anti-Slavery Society flyer, 1828

The earliest anti-slavery document we have in North Herts Museum is a printed sheet dated 12 May 1828 published by the Committee of the Hitchin Anti-Slavery Society. It is a copy of a speech given by the famous anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson in Ipswich the previous month. In it, he tells Parliament that it was the production of sugar, more than anything else, which was the most harmful to slaves: 'Here the whip is most in use. Here their labour is the most severe. Here their nightly rest is the most broken. Here their health is the most injured. It is on the Sugar Estates then, that there is the greatest suffering, and the greatest waste of human life... Are we then to see this wicked system go on without once more lifting up our voices against it?' he asks, finishing 'I say, do... that to others, which, if you were Slaves, you would wish to be done to yourselves.' The sheet also gives advance notice of a petition that the Hitchin Anti-Slavery Committee was about to publish and to hand out for signatures in the town and locally.

In 1830 54 local Freeholders (wealthy men who owned land and were allowed to vote) from Hitchin, Royston, Baldock and Hertford signed a letter to the High Sheriff of Hertfordshire, calling for a county meeting to petition Parliament for the 'early abolition of Slavery throughout the Colonies of the British Empire'. Hitchin signatories included well-known local families; Joseph, William and Samuel Lucas; John and Joshua Ransom; Joseph Sharples and John Whiting. In Royston, they included members of the Fordham and Beldam families. (Document at Herts County Archives)

Phebe Lucas's cousin William Lucas, another Quaker who ran the Lucas family brewery on the corner of Sun Street and Bridge Street, kept a diary for much of his life and attended many anti-slavery meetings. In May 1837 he was at a meeting, probably in London, where Joseph Sturge, who had founded the British & Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, spoke about his recent visit to the West Indies. Although the UK had legislated against slavery in 1807 and again in 1833, the Planters, who ran the plantations, got round this by ensuring that children over the age of six, and all adults, were bound to them as apprentices for 12 years. Sturge wrote and lectured widely about the cruelty of this system. In October 1837, William Lucas was in London for business and Queen Victoria's first Parliament, and he wrote that 'the Anti-Slavery delegates have been very active during the past week, and appear to be awakening public feeling to the abominable conduct of the Planters'. He also noted that his cousin (by marriage) Samuel Bowly was one of the most active and eloquent of the anti-slavery campaigners. North Herts Museum has a Samuel Lucas sketch showing these two key Quaker abolitionists Joseph Sturge and Samuel Bowly next to each other.

In February 1838 Samuel Lucas, William's brother (uncle of the artist) was there when Parliament discussed the slave trade and the evils of the 12-year apprenticeship system. In March William was again in London for an anti-slavery meeting where Joseph Sturge was speaking. Two months later he received a note acknowledging 'the receipt of our Anti-slavery petition [to Parliament] which had nearly four hundred signatures'. All this campaigning was successful, and on 1 August 1838, the British government finally put a stop to slavery in the British Empire, with the apprenticeships gradually ceasing by 1840.

June 1840 saw a major Anti-Slavery convention in London, which William Lucas attended with Samuel Bowly. William was there as one of three appointed local delegates. Veteran abolitionist Thomas Clarkson presided, and Joseph Sturge was one of the main speakers. There was a long discussion about admitting female delegates, as a number had come from America to take part. A large majority voted against this, so some of the American men also refused to participate. The artist Benjamin Haydon was busy sketching people, as he had been commissioned to paint a huge oil painting of the event, which William Lucas thought he would never be able to finish. In fact, he did finish it, and it is now in the National Portrait Gallery. William went down to London to see it when it was exhibited in December, but wasn't impressed, as 'the likenesses are generally not favourable'.



Sketch of abolitionists Joseph Sturge and Samuel Bowly, by Samuel Lucas, about 1850

Hitchin Town Hall (the original Town Hall opposite the North Herts Museum) opened in the autumn of 1840, and one of the very first meetings held there was an anti-slavery meeting addressed by John Scobel, a well-known abolitionist, and American Henry Stanton. They both stayed with the Lucas family while they were in Hitchin, and William and his wife Eliza invited large groups over for dinner, tea and supper to meet them. There was such interest locally in hearing the two speakers that the lecture hall was 'crowded to suffocation and the room which so many have exclaimed against as too large proved too small for the numbers'. Further anti-slavery meetings were held at the Town Hall during the 1840s. In 1841 the Hitchin Anti-Slavery committee met Josiah Forster, a well-known Quaker abolitionist, while he was visiting William Lucas's parents.

Black People in Victorian Hitchin

One of the most influential books ever written for the anti-slavery movement was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852 by American teacher Harriet Beecher Stowe. The book, which illustrated the horrors of the slave trade in the Southern States of the US, became the best-selling novel of the 19th century. In May 1853, William and Eliza Lucas went down to London for an Anti-slavery meeting that Harriet Beecher Stowe attended, arriving an hour and a half early to find seats. Back in Hitchin, Quaker Thomas Whiting gave a series of public readings of the book soon after its publication. According to Hitchin historian Reginald Hine, they took the town by storm, and 'Long afterwards men would speak about it as the greatest moment in their lives'. Indeed, the audience,



Detail from Samuel Lucas sketch of the reading of Uncle Tom's Cabin, in Hollow Lane, around 1852

which comprised a mixed group of people (from young female straw plaiters to 'Slut and ragman, tramp and sweep') were all moved to tears. Samuel Lucas sketched one of these readings, in a cottage on Hollow Lane, in which a young black man is listening intently. Sadly we do not know his identity. The audience also includes a listener with Oriental features, and the museum has another



Thomas Whiting reading Uncle Tom's Cabin in Hollow Lane, contemporary copy of Samuel Lucas drawing), about 1852



A page from the same Samuel Lucas sketchbook

Lucas sketch which depicts a different, older, black man as well as a similar Asian man wearing a circular pointed hat. This second drawing may have been made in Hitchin, or possibly in London.

The readings took place in a cottage in Hollow Lane, which was home to the first night school in Hitchin, started by Thomas Whiting to teach working men to read and write. William Lucas wrote a ten-verse poem about these readings, which starts:

Listen, there is someone reading
In that cottage dark and low
To a breathless audience, feeding
On some tale of human woe.

and ends:

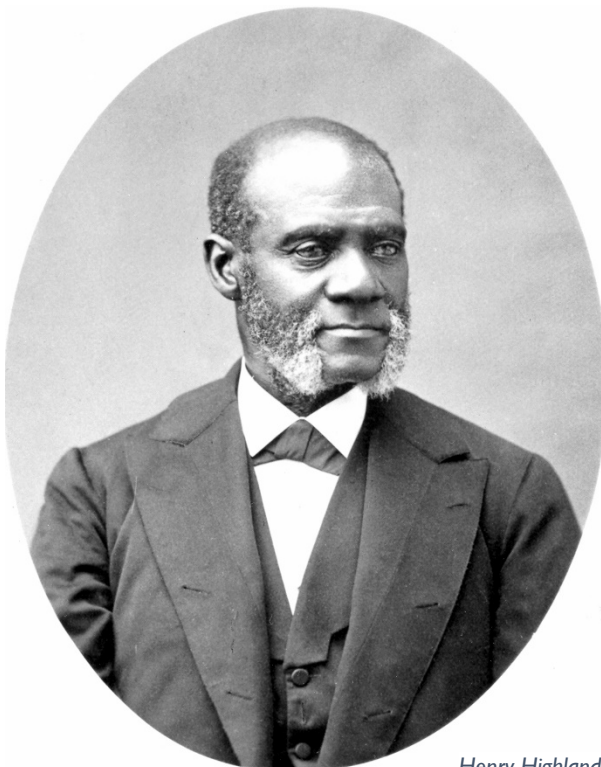
Prayers and groans and sighs are blending –
Soon a voice, in Thunder rolled, –
Speaks in Lightning flash descending
“Man by Man shall ne’er be sold”

(Transcript in the Lawson Thompson scrapbooks, North Herts Museum)

Samuel Lucas painted his best-known oil painting, ‘*Hitchin Market Place*’ in 1841. This work is displayed at North Herts Museum and shows Hitchin Marketplace crowded with people and animals, including about thirty well-known local characters. It depicts the town in about 1840 before the railway came to Hitchin ten years later, and a well-dressed black man may be seen amongst the characters on the left, holding or receiving a letter. We hope that one day research will allow us to



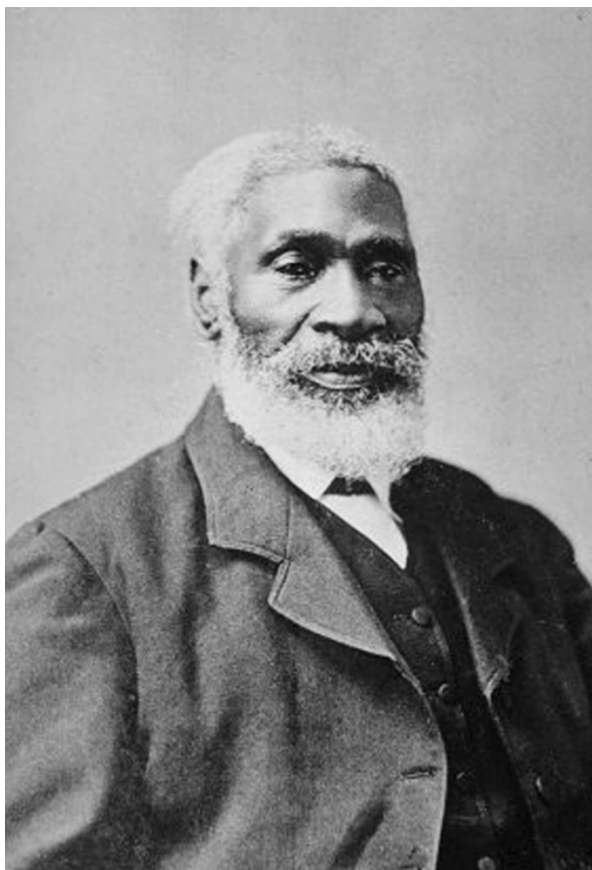
Detail from Samuel Lucas' painting of Hitchin Marketplace showing a black man holding or receiving a letter



Henry Highland Garnet (reproduced under a Creative Commons licence)

discover who he is. The painting was exhibited in the Mechanics Institution in the middle of Hitchin in 1856, where it attracted a great deal of attention.

At least three freed or escaped slaves were invited to Hitchin in the second half of the nineteenth century. The first was Henry Highland Garnet (1815-1882), grandson of an African chief who was later sold into slavery. He escaped from Maryland with his family as a child and grew up to become a renowned abolitionist minister and the first black man to speak at the House of Representatives. He visited Hitchin at some point during his lecture tour of Great Britain, between 1850 and 1852, staying with the Exton family at Grove Mill House. Although the dates fit, the man in the drawing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* looks a little young to be Henry Highland Garnet.



Josiah Henson (1789-1883) (reproduced under a Creative Commons licence
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=18610578>)

SALEM CHAPEL, HITCHIN

TUESDAY, JUNE 5TH,

(Kindly lent for the occasion).

The Jubilee Singers, Freed Slaves

From the U.S.A., will give a

SERVICE OF SONG AS ABOVE,

Consisting principally of Quaint Slave Hymns and Melodies sung by them in their Days of Slavery.

Doors open at 6.30, to begin at 7.30.

Tickets—Reserved and Numbered Seats, 3s.; Secor Seats, 2s. For sale at Messrs. PATERNOSTER & HALE and Mr. PALMER's, High-street, where Plan of Chapel may be seen and seats selected at once.

A few 1s. tickets will be sold at the doors.

All the proceeds of this Service will be devoted to the Education of Freed Slaves at Fisk University, Nashville, U. S. A.

The Jubilee Singers have just returned from a tour through Holland, where they had the distinguished honour of a royal command to appear before His Most Gracious Majesty, King William, at his palace.

The Entrance for the Reserved Seats and 2s. Ticket will be at the principal gates of the building in Tilehouse-street.

The Entrance for Shilling Tickets, of which limited number only will be issued, will be the gate Wratten, where the tickets will be sold.

Advertisement for 'The Jubilee Singers, Freed Slaves' in The Hertfordshire Express, June 1877

In 1877, Josiah Henson (1789-1883), the escaped slave on whom Harriet Beecher Stowe based her book, also came to Hitchin. He was by this time aged 87 and had arrived in the UK the previous year for a speaking tour of over 100 towns, including a meeting in March 1877 with Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle.

On 5 June 1877, the Jubilee Singers, a group of ten freed slaves, students of Fisk University, performed in Hitchin as part of a European tour. This took place in the Salem Chapel, because it was the largest hall in Hitchin, and the organisers knew that the concert would be a sell-out. William Lucas summed up the evening by saying that it had brought him to tears and that because of the sect in which he had been brought up (i.e. as a Quaker) he had not had the opportunity to listen to music, and now felt that this was something all children should be taught. The Jubilee Singers introduced slave songs to the wider public and were key to the preservation of the negro spiritual tradition. All proceeds from the tour were sent back to Fisk University, a black college in Tennessee, founded after the American Civil War, and the tour proceeds were used to construct the university's first permanent building.

That October another freed slave, Rev Thomas Johnson (1836-1921), author of *Twenty Eight Years a Slave* gave a rousing speech about his life at the Tilehouse Street Baptist Mission, which was greeted with great applause. Johnson was separated from his mother when he was three and did not see her again until he was nine. He was not freed until the age of 28. He became a missionary in Africa the year after his talk in Hitchin and later settled in Bournemouth, where he remained until he died in 1921. For years afterwards, people there remembered the slave chains and whips displayed in his house, and his comment 'Shake hands - the black won't come off!'

Anti-Slavery in other North Herts towns

Hitchin was not the only town concerned to fight the evils of slavery; in Royston, young lawyer Joseph Beldam (1795-1866) resigned his practice to dedicate his time to the anti-slavery movement, joining the Anti-Slavery Society in 1827. He edited many of the Society publications, and used his legal expertise on its behalf in the 1830s, representing the Society when Parliament was discussing the plantation apprenticeship system and its abolition. Beldam edited the proceedings of the first meeting of the Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and the Civilisation of Africa in 1840.

In Baldock, there is a splendid monument in the churchyard to William Clarkson (1758-1830). William was a good friend, but not known to be a relation, of the famous anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson. The monument's inscription reads that 'He zealously supported his friend Thomas Clarkson Esq of Playford Hall Suffolk in promoting measures for the abolition of the slave trade. He left money for keeping this tomb in perpetual repair and for an annual statutory sermon of which fund the rector and churchwarden are the trustees.' It is frustrating to know so little about this man, who died in Lincolnshire.



Monument to William Clarkson in the churchyard of St Mary's, Baldock

Links with Slavery

There are a few less positive links to the slave trade in North Hertfordshire. James Lucas (1813-1874), known locally as 'Mad Lucas', was a wealthy but eccentric young man, who became a hermit after his mother died, and lived the rest of his life in squalor in Much Wymondley. He was not related to the Hitchin Quaker family of the same name. Lucas was born into a family of wealthy West India merchants, with sugar plantations in British Guiana and St Vincent. A troubling footnote to Hine's chapter on Lucas in his book '*Hitchin Worthies*' suggests that he became a hermit to do penance on his mother's behalf, 'for her having killed one of the slaves on the Lucas sugar plantations in the West Indies.'

The North Hertfordshire Museum collection also contains a book by Maria Edgeworth, a hugely popular author for adults and children around 1800, which includes her story *The Grateful Negro*, first published in 1804. This tale, about a slave revolt in Jamaica, was used by some abolitionists even though it ends by supporting benevolent planters, rather than advocating the complete abolition of slavery. More recently the book has been the subject of much academic discussion and varied textual interpretation.

In conclusion

From this research, it seems that many people in what is now North Hertfordshire were angered by slavery in the West Indies and also in Africa, and lobbied for change both locally and in Parliament. This is partly due to a large number of important Quaker families here, particularly in Hitchin, who made the time to attend national meetings in London and report back. Local non-conformists like Baptists and Congregationalists also favoured ending the slave trade, but unlike the Quakers seem to have been more concerned with the missionary aspects of abolition, and the possibilities of converting freed slaves to Christianity. This essay has just scratched the surface of the subject; there is still much to discover about the anti-slavery movement in North Herts, and more particularly about our Victorian black and Asian inhabitants.

Find out more

Information for this essay comes mainly from newspapers and documents in the North Hertfordshire Museum Collection and the following books:

A Mirror for the Society of Friends, Being the story of Hitchin Quakers, Reginald Hine, George Allen & Unwin, 1929

Hitchin Worthies, Four centuries of English Life, Reginald Hine, George Allen & Unwin, 1932

A Quaker Journal: Being the Diary & Reminiscences of William Lucas of Hitchin (1804-1861) Hutchinson, 1934

The Diary of Joshua Whiting (1802-1909), Sarah Graham, Sessions, 2006

Phebe's Hitchin Book: Memories of life on Regency Hitchin Annotated by John Lucas, Hitchin Historical Society, 2009

Also see the *Herts Memories* website, which has a page devoted to the Abolition of Slavery, with six different articles: <https://www.hertsmemories.org.uk/content/category/herts-history/topics/abolition-of-slavery>

Rosamond Allwood
June 2020