

English journeys: Hull: Time to dock at this port: One of the country's most historic ports, Hull is also the birthplace of William Wilberforce. And as 2007 marks 200 years since the slave trade was abolished in Britain, the whole city knows it's time for celebration

From The Guardian - 03/03/2007

Guardian Newsprint Supplement

Angela Robson

He's either a pilgrim or homeless, I think, observing the slumbering man basking in the sunshine close to Wilberforce House in the heart of Hull's historic Old Town.

Wilberforce's birthplace is closed today for renovations but social historian, Jayne Tyler, has arranged a whistle-stop tour. She is in charge of Wilberforce 2007 - Hull's celebrations to mark the bicentenary of the slave trade's abolition in Britain on March 25. A statue of the man named by a BBC poll as "the greatest ever Yorkshireman", and one of the most influential figures in British political history, stands life-size in the front garden. "England owes to him the reformation of manners. The world owes to him the abolition of slavery," claim the words chiselled into the base.

As we dodge under ladders, the sound of drilling piercing the air, I am not sure initially if it is Jayne Tyler's infectious enthusiasm about the bicentenary, or the spirit of the magnificent 17th-century building, that most astounds. Wilberforce's birthplace has been completely reworked in a pounds 1.6m transformation with stunning interactive exhibits, hands-on learning and new West African culture and contemporary slavery galleries. When the museum reopens, the whole of Wilberforce's personal library will be on display for the first time.

"People in Hull have always been keen to promote all that Wilberforce represents, particularly his free thinking," says Tyler. "And this resonates in the city's street and place names. We've got a host of exciting events lined up for Wilberforce 2007: public lectures, festivals, western and African music, as well as a range of community projects and heritage trails."

Although it's difficult to wander through the house and get a close sense of the man who lived here 250-odd years ago, there's enough historical evidence to tell you about the influences that shaped him. Wilberforce, the son of a prosperous merchant, would have lived "over the shop", and sailors, press gangs and prostitutes would have traded outside the front door.

A short walk down the wharfs between magnificent red-brick warehouses outside leads the visitor right down to the river Humber. A popular attraction is Hull's last sidewinder trawler, the Arctic Corsair, a reminder of the city's past as one of the world's biggest fishing ports.

"New tourists are usually overwhelmed by what the city has to offer, especially when they come to its historic heart," says historian and English Heritage guide, Paul Schofield. His Walking With Wilberforce trail tells the story of abolition and also uncovers Hull's history as a maritime port. Ninety per cent of the city was destroyed during the Blitz, but Hull's Old Town miraculously withstood the bombing. The shaded brickwork along the promenade by the marina indicates the route of Hull's medieval walls.

In 1778, the first dock opened in Hull, followed by Humber Dock in 1809, and Prince's Dock in 1829 and was the first enclosed dock in the country. Hull dominated the Arctic whaling trade in the early 19th century and the Maritime Museum has the largest collection of scrimshaw (the folk art of the whaler) on this side of the Atlantic. The museum also tells the story of the city's involvement in fishing, initially in the North Sea and then out to Norway, Iceland and Greenland.

Schofield tells me that a lot of people write off the city without even having visited, but that the most knowledgeable are often, surprisingly, from overseas.

"Descendants of free slaves who come here as a place of pilgrimage often know more about Wilberforce and the city of his birth than the English," he says.

From the middle ages, the core of Hull's trade was with the Baltic and Scandinavia. Unlike the thriving slave ports of Liverpool and Bristol, Hull was on the wrong side of the country for the burgeoning transatlantic trade, so had far less to lose from abolition.

After a stop-off at the city gates, where in 1642 the city refused King Charles I entry to Hull - famously precipitating the English Civil War - we head past the marina, towards the wonderfully named Dagger Lane, so called as knives were available here for fishermen as they left their trawlers in search of excitement in the city.

Before Wilberforce underwent a powerful religious conversion in 1784, resolving to commit his future life and work wholly in the service of God, he engaged fully in many of the pleasures Hull had to offer. The city was, he recalls, "as gay a place as could be found out of London. The theatres, balls, great suppers and card-parties were the delight of the principal families in the town."

"Being in Hull, it's hard to ignore the Wilberforce brand," says Dr Nick Evans, who teaches the MA course in modern slavery at the recently established WISE - the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation, located in Mandela Gardens, right next to Wilberforce House. "The bicentenary will give us an opportunity to celebrate in Hull, but also to recognise that 200 years on, at least 27 million people are still in slavery."

The Emancipation Movement still has unfinished business, but Paul Schofield believes the host of high-profile events taking place this year in Hull and beyond, is enormously significant. "Hull people have always been a bit radical," he declares. "That's why we're so in awe of Wilberforce's courage and determination."

© Copyright 2007. The Guardian. All rights reserved.