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JOSPEH STURGE AND THE ANTI SLAVERY SOCIETY

Birmingham is perhaps less obviously a centre of the slave trade than cities such as Liverpool and Bristol. However, with its strong manufacturing base, Birmingham was well equipped to provide goods for sale in West Africa and the Caribbean. Inevitably, many local businesses profited from this 'triangular' trade route; but it was just as inevitable that a city famous for non-conformity and dissent should also become a centre for the campaigns of the abolitionists.

One of the leading activists was Joseph Sturge (1793-1859). Born in 1793 in Gloucestershire, Sturge moved to Birmingham in 1822 following the collapse of his company. Starting again with a warehouse and tiny office, he was soon diversifying into other areas such as railways and canals. However, after establishing himself Sturge left much of the day-to-day work to his partner and brother Charles, preferring to concentrate on more philanthropic pursuits. Sturge became involved with the local Anti-Slavery Society soon after his arrival in Birmingham, and became secretary in 1826. He quickly lost patience with the more cautious character of the Society's London leadership, arguing instead for more public meetings and agitation of a wider kind. 'The people must emancipate the slaves,' was Sturge's argument, 'for the Government never will.'

The campaigns by the Anti-Slavery Society and other groups resulted in the 1833 Emancipation Act, which abolished slavery and replaced it with a system of apprenticeship. Visiting the Caribbean in 1836, Sturge saw first hand that little had changed, and that working conditions were as harsh as ever. A letter to him from a group of abolitionists in Jamaica makes clear their feelings on apprenticeship, describing the system as 'a most iniquitous and accursed one... that instead of assuming a more lenient aspect... is becoming increasingly oppressive & vexatious [so] that the change is more in name than in reality.'

On his return to England, Sturge continued to campaign against indentured labour and was instrumental in gaining its abolition in 1838. However, this did not stop his efforts, and he continued to work on behalf of slaves in other parts of the world; in 1857, he purchased the Elberton Sugar Estate on the Caribbean island of Montserrat. The land was purchased primarily to turn the estate's production to growing limes, but also provided Sturge with the opportunity to prove that free labour was productive. His death in 1859 ended his involvement with the project, but the estates continued to be managed by the family throughout the 19th century.

Material Located in Birmingham City Archives

IIR 62 [152006] Minutes of the Birmingham Anti-Slavery Society, 1826-37, 1837-59.