

## COWBRIDGE AND SLAVERY

Among all the celebrations for the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, Cowbridge has had a very honourable mention because of the links that Iolo Morganwg had with the town. His oft-quoted attributes include ‘scholar, stonemason, poet, historian, faker’ – but to these we must add ‘radical politician’. An anti-war activist, he hated the cruelty of the slave trade and was a good friend of William Wilberforce who was the key figure in the drive to abolish slavery.

Iolo’s three brothers had emigrated to Jamaica and had prospered as a result of using slave labour, but Iolo’s strong anti-slave trade views made him refuse to accept money from them until they liberated their slaves.

On travelling to Bristol in 1791, according to his biographer Elijah Waring, he heard the town’s bells being rung out in a celebratory peal. On learning that the rejoicing was caused by the fact that Wilberforce’s Anti-Slavery bill had been thrown out in the Commons, Iolo turned on his heel in disgust and turned his back on Bristol and returned home.

In his little shop in Cowbridge, where Martins the newsagent is today, Iolo was pleased to sell (among a variety of goods) sugar from the East Indies and not from the slave-worked plantations of the West Indies. His advert in the shop stated: “East India sweets – uncontaminated by human gore”.

I have selected some verses from a poem which he is supposed to have written:

“At Cowbridge the name of Ned Williams appears  
A shop-keeping bard, having choicest of wares  
To those having money, be this understood  
Ring the bell of his door, he sells everything good.

Here are currants and raisins, delicious French plums  
The Christian-free sugar from East India comes  
And brought from where truth is not yet in the bud  
Rank Church-and-King sweets for the lovers of blood.

Here are hats of all sorts, good as ever were seen,  
One guinea. one shilling, all prices between  
And fearless of spies and th’informers fell traps  
He’ll soon become dealer in Liberty caps.

Th’abettor of slavery, the Church-and-King Turk,  
Here may be supplied with the quibbler of Burke,  
Cowper’s King-flogging talk, how delightful the strain!  
And for lovers of truth, Rights of Man by Tom Paine.

Come all to this shop where good usage you’ll find,  
Most anxious attempts to suit everyone’s mind,  
Attendance at call, the most humble regard  
For all favours due thanks from Ned Williams the Bard.”

This of course was taking place not long after the War of American Independence, and just after the French Revolution, when revolutionary fervour was perhaps at its highest, and where Church and State were feeling particularly vulnerable, and extremely concerned about people like Iolo – hence the talk of spies and informers.

When Wilberforce's anti-slavery bill was finally passed in 1807, Iolo Morganwg wrote a celebratory poem, 'Can Rhyddhad y Caethion', (Song on the Liberation of Slaves).

By contrast, there are probably some more direct links between Cowbridge and the slave trade, however. 56 High Street in Cowbridge was owned in about 1800 by John David Roberts of the parish of Westmoreland in the county of Cornwall in Jamaica. Whether or not he was a slave-owner, we do not know; but he was related to another John Roberts, an apothecary who owned the same house 50 years earlier (and had owned 69 High Street in the 1750s). William Thomas's diary for 20<sup>th</sup> May 1763 states:

“Was buried since March in St Kitts Isle (in the West Indies) that wicked man . . .

John (Dr) Roberts, son of John Roberts, apothecary of Cowbridge, about 40 years old, had been on thirteen voyages to the coast of Guinea, but villainous to the men”.

The journey from the coast of Guinea (in west Africa) to the West Indies was of course part of the triangular trade involving the carriage of slaves to the West Indies, so it would seem likely that this 'villainous' man was directly involved in the slave trade; it is quite possible that his nephew or great-nephew was as well.

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