

KEY EVENTS - The Thomas Clarkson Timeline.

1760 on 28th March Thomas Clarkson was born in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire. His father was the local headmaster. Clarkson was only six when his father died in 1766.

Clarkson went to the local grammar school and later St John's College, Cambridge University.

1785 Clarkson entered an essay writing competition at Cambridge University. The title was: 'Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their wills?' Clarkson, like many people in Britain at the time, knew very little about the horrors of the slave trade. He spent the next two months reading up on the subject of slavery. As he read, his feelings started to change. His research made him realise how evil the slave trade was. He was shocked by what he discovered about how enslaved Africans were treated.

1785 Clarkson won first prize for his essay and in the summer he was invited back to the university to read it in the Senate House. After the talk, Clarkson left for London. On his journey Clarkson thought a lot about slavery. He became more and more upset and angry at the thought that slavery would continue. As he reached Wadesmill in Hertfordshire, Clarkson stopped, sat down and reflected on his life. It was here that Clarkson decided to devote his life to abolishing the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

In London, Clarkson met other people who wanted to stop the British Transatlantic Slave Trade. He added to his essay and in June **1786** it was published. The essay was read by lots of people and Clarkson became a well-known figure.

In May **1787**, Clarkson and 11 other men set up the **Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade**. The society was able to persuade **William Wilberforce**, the MP for Hull, to speak out for them in Parliament. Wilberforce was able to use his contacts to try and set up a parliamentary investigation into the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Clarkson worked hard to collect as much evidence as possible that would prove how badly enslaved Africans were treated. His travels would take him 35,000 miles around the country and make him one of the best-known men in the kingdom.

1787 Clarkson visited Bristol. He met two surgeons who had worked on the slave ships, **James Arnold** and **Alexander Falconbridge**. They both gave him detailed descriptions of life on the slave ships.

Leaving Bristol, Clarkson pressed on to Liverpool, in search of more witnesses. Clarkson had a lucky escape from a gang of sailors who seem to have been paid to assassinate him. Clarkson was alone when eight or nine men attacked him and attempted to shove him towards the end of the pier. Clarkson believed that the gang was determined to throw him into the sea and make it look like an accident. Fortunately he was able to push one of the gang to the ground and, despite being hit by the others, he was able to break through and escape.

After Liverpool, Clarkson rode to Manchester. Here he delivered a powerful and moving speech in which he gave many examples from his own research into the cruel way in which slaves were treated.

Clarkson returned to London towards the end of **1788**. He had been away for more than five months and had persuaded many people around the country to support the abolition cause.

1788 Clarkson set about collecting more witnesses and evidence that he hoped would win the argument in Parliament for abolition. He set out on another tour, covering 1,600 miles in two months. At Plymouth he uncovered a key piece of evidence, the plan and section of a loaded slave ship. Clarkson reworked the plan in London, applying the idea to the *Brookes* (a slave ship from Liverpool).

Towards the end of **1789**, Clarkson went to France in order to try and persuade the new French government to abolish the French slave trade. Clarkson gave out copies of the *Brookes* diagram and his essay. Clarkson had powerful enemies working against him in France and he suffered from a lot of abuse. He received a death threat that he would be stabbed to death and rumours were begun that he was a British government spy. France did not abandon the trade.

1790 Clarkson returned home to England in order to prepare evidence for Parliament's investigation into the Transatlantic Slave Trade. He travelled over 7,000 miles finding witnesses and persuading people to support the campaign to end slavery.

1791 William Wilberforce introduced his first Bill to abolish the British Transatlantic Slave Trade. Despite the mountain of evidence that Clarkson had collected Parliament did not vote in favour of the bill. It was heavily defeated by 163 votes to 88 votes.

Wilberforce and Clarkson refused to be put off by this setback and their fight against slavery continued. Clarkson travelled throughout England, Wales and Scotland, covering 6,000 miles. New abolition groups were set up in places such as Nottingham, Newcastle and Glasgow. Clarkson also encouraged people to join the boycott of West Indian 'slave-grown' sugar. By the end of 1791 around 300,000 people were refusing to buy West Indian sugar.

In April, **1792**. Parliament once again debated abolishing the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Once again they refused to ban the trade straight away. By 1793 Britain was at war with France. Both public and parliament lost interest in the debate to abolish the slave trade. Clarkson was beginning to suffer from ill health as a result of his work. He was physically and mentally exhausted. Constant travelling, often on horseback, and sitting up and writing until two or three o'clock in the morning had left him seriously ill.

in January, **1796** Clarkson married Catherine Buck from Bury St Edmunds. They moved to the Lake District and bought a 35-acre farm.

1803 Clarkson and his family moved to Bury St Edmunds. Here they lived in a house belonging to Catherine's father in St Mary's square.

1804 Clarkson became active in the anti-slavery campaign again and in 1805 he began another tour of England gathering support for the anti-slavery movement.

1807 the slave trade was finally abolished in the British Empire. The new law stated that any British captain caught with slaves on board would be fined £10 for every slave on the ship. This was a significant achievement for the anti-slavery movement but the law did not go far enough. It did not outlaw slavery completely or make arrangements for enslaved Africans to be set free.

1814 Clarkson travelled to France again, hoping to persuade the French to abolish the trade. He returned to Paris in September 1815 where he met the ruler of Russia (**Tsar Alexander I**). Clarkson hoped that the Russian Tsar could persuade other leaders to support the abolition of the slave trade across Europe. The Russian Tsar invited Clarkson to write to him with a suggestion on how the slave trade could be ended.

1815 Clarkson also began to write to **Henry Christophe**, the ruler of Haiti. A resistance movement led by **Toussaint L'Ouverture** had defeated both French and British forces and Haiti was now an independent country, without slavery. Henry hoped for trade and the support of other European countries. Clarkson became Haiti's European advisor.

In **1816** Clarkson moved to **Playford Hall**, near Ipswich.

1820 Henry Christophe shot himself after his army rebelled against him in October. His two sons were also killed but the Queen and her two daughters survived. For a few months (1821-22) Madame Marie-Louise and her two daughters lived with the Clarkson's at Playford Hall, near Ipswich.

At the Congress of Verona in **1822**, Wilberforce and Clarkson once again tried to persuade the European powers to ban the slave trade but their efforts failed.

1823 a new group was formed that aimed to abolish slavery (**The Society for Mitigating and Gradually Abolishing the State of Slavery throughout the British Dominions**). Younger men led the campaign but Wilberforce and Clarkson supported the group. Clarkson, aged 63, went on another national tour, covering 10,000 miles, in order to raise support for the cause.

1833 the **Slavery Abolition Act** was passed. The new law meant that all enslaved people in the British Empire were given their freedom. However, the new Act was not everything campaigners such as Clarkson would have wanted. Firstly, £20 million compensation was paid to the slave owners (the amount today would be about £1,220 million). Secondly, before slaves became free they had to work as 'apprentices' for six years. (As apprentices, enslaved Africans had to work for their former masters for six years, with no pay. Only children under six were given true freedom).

During the 1830s and early 1840s Clarkson became involved in the American anti-slavery movement. In 1833 **William Lloyd Garrison**, the leader of an American Anti-Slavery Society visited Clarkson at Playford Hall.

1837 Clarkson's only child (Tom) was killed in an accident, aged 40.

1838 a petition was presented to Parliament protesting about the apprenticeship system signed by 499,000 people. Parliament finally ended the apprenticeship system on 1 August 1838. However, also in 1838, Wilberforce's sons published a biography of their father. It downplayed Clarkson's contribution to the abolition of slavery. Clarkson was upset and was forced to defend his reputation.

By **1840** the British Anti-Slavery movement had set its sights on abolishing slavery throughout the world. In June they set up a General Convention in London. Clarkson was voted President of the Convention and accepted a standing tribute from 5,000 delegates and observers from Britain, the United States, Canada, France, the West Indies, Switzerland and Spain. Clarkson was treated as a major celebrity and there were many requests for his autograph.

1846 Thomas Clarkson died at Playford Hall on 26 September, aged 86. He was buried at the local church (St Mary's, Playford).