

Citizens Against Slavery

The ordinary citizens of Britain were the backbone of the anti-slavery movement. Without their support it would have failed. How could they organise themselves and put pressure on the government?

Local societies and committees

Towns and cities throughout Britain set up abolition committees to organise the local campaigns. Particularly important were the ones in Manchester, Exeter, Plymouth and Newcastle. There was a whole network of committees that collected money to send to London, put out leaflets and information to people in the local area, drew up petitions and got them signed, wrote letters to local newspapers and set up

debates. They were led by shopkeepers, grocers, teachers, doctors, vicars and the like.

Petitions

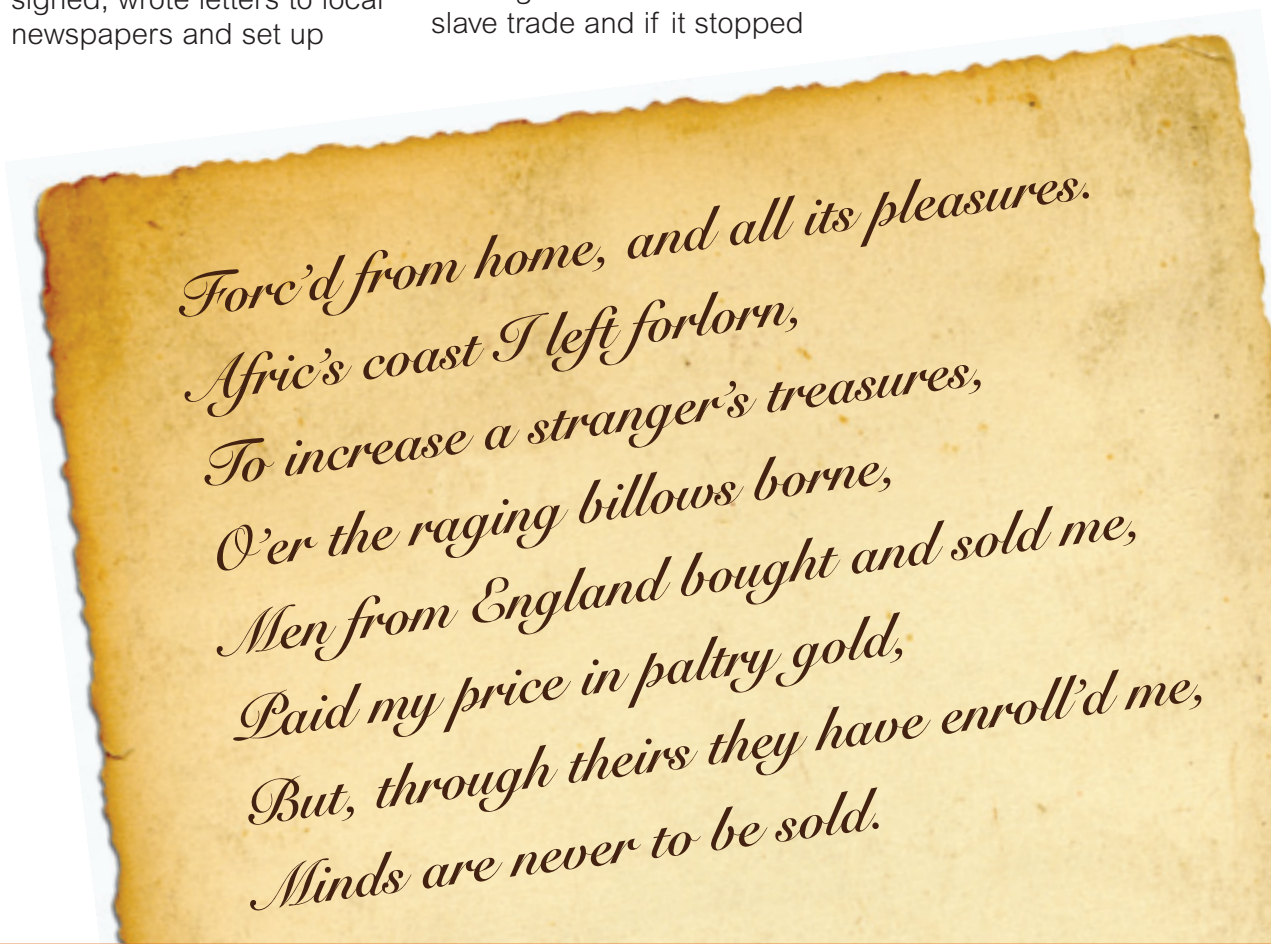
Petitions were important at a time when few people could vote. They were the main way people could get their views heard. In 1788, 103 petitions calling for the abolition of the slave trade were signed by up to 100,000 people. Petitions were left in town halls, shops, banks and coffee houses. One at Leeds was signed by 'the rough sons of lowest labour'. In 1789, metalworkers in Sheffield signed a petition. This was surprising because they made goods used in the slave trade and if it stopped

they might lose their jobs. This shows how strongly they felt about it.

In 1792, 510 abolition petitions flooded in from all over the country with almost 400,000 names on them. These petitions created a loud public voice which was difficult for MPs to ignore.

Poetry and music

In a similar way that music features in protest today, the anti-slavery message was put out in poems and in songs. William Cowper wrote the poem 'Negro's Complaint' which became a song sung on the streets. Illustrated below is the first verse:



*Forc'd from home, and all its pleasures,
Afric's coast I left forlorn,
To increase a stranger's treasures,
O'er the raging billows borne,
Men from England bought and sold me,
Paid my price in paltry gold,
But, through theirs they have enroll'd me,
Minds are never to be sold.*