

Thomas Clarkson (1760 – 1846)

Thomas Clarkson dedicated his life to the abolition of the slave trade. As a young man, he wrote an essay 'Is it right to make men slaves against their will?' and this convinced him that he had to put all his efforts into stopping the evil trade. He joined with several other people in forming the Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade.

Clarkson decided he needed to find out how the slave trade operated. He toured the slave ports of Bristol and Liverpool interviewing hundreds of sailors, collecting information on every aspect of the trade. He talked to the suppliers of the leg irons and branding irons and became aware of the size of the business that supported slavery. He realised that the slave trade was worth a fortune to the people involved. When they found out what he was doing, he was threatened with violence and on one occasion there was an attempt to murder him.

Campaigning

Clarkson needed to find ways to shock the public so that they would act. He used the following tactics:

- **He went round the country giving talks about the slave trade. He was a very good speaker.**

- **He carried a chest full of the terrible instruments used to subdue and punish the slaves like leg irons and thumb screws.**
- **He also took a chest full of African artefacts to show people that Africans had a rich culture and were skilled craftsmen and artists. He did this to counter the views of some people at the time that black people were inferior.**
- **He produced pamphlets on the horrors of the trade.**
- **He realised the importance of visual images and produced the famous picture called**

'The Print' which showed Africans packed in rows inside a slave ship called The Brookes.

- **He worked with Josiah Wedgwood, the famous pottery manufacturer, to produce a pottery seal with a picture of a slave on it and the words, 'Am I not a man and a brother?' This design was put onto other goods like snuff boxes and hairpins which showed the person supported the anti-slave trade campaign.**

It was a powerful campaign. Clarkson and the anti-slavery committee drew in thousands of supporters to put pressure on the government to stop the trade.



'Am I not a man and a brother' medallion: Copyright Wedgwood Museum. Not to be reproduced without the permission of the Wedgwood Museum Trustees.