

William Wilberforce (1759 – 1833)

William Wilberforce was the leader of the campaign to abolish slavery in Parliament and in many eyes the leader of the anti-slavery movement. He was famous for his powerful and moving speeches against slavery. Wilberforce had become an MP at 21, the youngest age at which you could become one. In 1785, he became an evangelical Christian and committed himself to good works.

Wilberforce was horrified by all the evidence collected on the slave trade. Working with Clarkson, he put this evidence before MPs in the House of Commons. Through 1788 – 91 he worked tirelessly to push through a Bill abolishing the slave trade, but it was defeated. Wilberforce reintroduced the Bill time and time again over the next few years but there were powerful people who opposed it. Eventually he was successful and on 23 February 1807 Parliament voted overwhelmingly for the abolition of the slave trade. Wilberforce was seen to have tears running down his face as the MPs cheered him.

Campaigning

Wilberforce's role in the campaign was crucial:

- **His brilliant speeches in the House of Commons swayed people there and outside.**
- **Wilberforce was a member of the Church of England. It was very important to the anti-slavery movement to have a respected figure like him as its leader. Many of the other leaders were Quakers. Some people were suspicious of them**

because of their religious views and customs, so they would not follow their lead.

- **Wilberforce steered the Bill to abolish the slave trade through Parliament. He was often not well. Despite this, it was his dedication, constantly putting the case against slavery and meeting continually with supporters that saw it turned into law.**

To be successful, campaigns often need famous and respected people who can speak persuasively in public.

