Walk: Abolition in Bristol

Take a walk around Bristol to find out more about historic figures and places which contributed to the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act.

1. BEGIN AT COLLEGE GREEN, LOOKING UP PARK STREET
   Hannah More was born in Stapleton, Bristol and became an anti-slavery campaigner, playwright and religious writer. A friend of William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson, she spoke out openly against the slave trade and joined the boycott of slave-produced West Indian sugar in 1778. You can see a portrait of Hannah More in the Georgian House Museum on Great George Street (off Park Street).

2. BRISTOL CATHEDRAL
   Memorials to several people pertinent to the abolition cause can be found in Bristol Cathedral, including a bust of Robert Southey in poets’ corner. Like many of the Romantic poets Southey spoke out against the slave trade in his work.
   **Directions:** Head for the waterfront, cross Pero’s Bridge and Narrow Quay. Walk through Queen Square, cross Redcliffe Bridge. Turn right at the roundabout. Opposite St Mary Redcliffe is the former Quaker burial ground.

3. QUAKER BURIAL GROUND
   Although some Quakers were involved in the slave trade, in 1760, the Society of Friends became the first faith to oppose the trade and ban their members from trading in slaves. A plaque at the entrance to the site, which is now a park, tells how the area was used for Quaker burials from 1665 until as recently as 1923.

4. ST. MARY REDCLIFFE CHURCH
   Opposite is St Mary Redcliffe Church. There is a memorial to Thomas Chatterton in the churchyard. Bristol’s ‘boy poet’ was critical of the slave trade in his work.
   **Directions:** Cross the road at the roundabout and walk up Redcliffe Street. Look out for Thomas Lane on the right and turn into this narrow street.

5. SEVEN STARS PUB
   The Seven Stars pub is perhaps the most significant landmark to abolition in Bristol. It was here in 1787 that Thomas Clarkson stayed in order to gather evidence of the slave trade for his friend William Wilberforce.
   **Directions:** Continue up Thomas Lane and turn left into St Thomas Street and left again onto Victoria Street. Cross the river via Bristol bridge and then head left into Castle Green en route to Broadmead shopping centre. Go up Merchant Street and turn left into Broadmead. Tucked away on the right, immediately before The Arcade you will find John Wesley’s New Room.

6. WESLEY’S NEW ROOM
   John Wesley opposed the trade in humans and in 1774 published his Thoughts upon Slavery. A sermon at the New Room against slavery was disturbed by explosion.
   **Directions:** From Broadmead, head for Union Street. Cross it and follow Nelson Street until you reach Broad Street.

7. BROAD STREET
   The first open meeting in Bristol on the abolition of the slave trade occurred in 1788, in the medieval Guild Hall (now demolished), on Broad Street.
   **Directions:** Continue up Broad Street and turn right into Corn Street, the commercial heart of 18th Century Bristol, where merchants met to trade and socialise. Turn right down St Stephen’s Street and head for the church (if you are a wheelchair or buggy user, use St Stephen’s Avenue to avoid a flight of stairs).

8. ST. STEPHEN’S CHURCH
   Economist and political writer Josiah Tucker (1713-1799), was curate and rector of St Stephen’s Church from 1737. While Dean of Gloucester he helped the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson with his early investigations into the slave trade.
   **Directions:** From the church, head up St Stephen’s Avenue, cross Baldwin Street and head up Marsh Street. Turn left on to King Street. Here you will find the Theatre Royal and the former Merchant Venturers’ Hall.

9. MERCHANT VENTURERS’ HALL
   On the corner of King Street and Marsh Street is the site of the old Merchants’ Hall, destroyed in the Blitz and now replaced by a modern office block, Venturers’ House. The Merchant Venturers were a powerful group, who in the 18th Century lobbied to ensure Bristol had its share of the African trade. Abolitionists Thomas Clarkson gained access to the merchants’ muster rolls at the hall and found them to contain information about high mortality rates among the crews of slave ships. This evidence outraged the Bristol public and added weight to the abolitionists’ cause. The 1696 Merchants almshouses, which were adjacent to the hall, survived. Victims of illness and brutality on board the slave ships, it’s likely that crewmen were housed in these almshouses after returning from sea. The present Merchants’ Hall is now in Clifton.

10. THEATRE ROYAL
    Bristol Old Vic is England’s oldest working theatre, opened in 1766. The original 50 patron, many of whom were Merchant Venturers, each invested £50 in the building. Several plays adopted by the abolitionists were performed at the Old Vic, included ‘The Padlock’ which was praised by Clarkson for its importance to the abolition cause.

For the full version of the Bristol Abolition Walk, please visit:

bbc.co.uk/bristol/abolition