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***AND THE CHILDREN'S TEETH ARE SET ON EDGE***

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•CHAPTER 6•

## *Quayside Incident.*

*Lured by the promise of promotion,  
And hopes of speedy store,  
Poor Jem, who oft had braved the ocean,  
Resolved for Afric's shore.  
In vain each relative dissuaded,  
E'en Nanny sigh'd in vain;  
He felt – but all they urged, evaded,  
He smiled and sought the main.*

*Edward Rushton*

Thomas Clarkson, the acclaimed pioneer of abolition, visited Liverpool in the summer of 1787 on a fact-finding tour of the slave ports.<sup>1</sup> Clarkson, whom Coleridge described as a “moral steam engine”,<sup>2</sup> made little attempt to proceed with caution, or to conceal his intentions, and before the end of his visit there occurred, on the pier-head, an incident which he interpreted as a serious attempt to put a period to his life.

*“I was one day on the pier-head with many others looking at some little boats below at the time of a heavy gale. Several persons, probably out of curiosity, were hastening thither. I had seen all I intended to see, and was departing, when I noticed eight or nine persons making towards me. I was then only about eight or nine yards from the precipice of the pier, but going from it. I expected that they would have divided to let me through them; instead of which they closed upon me and bore me back. I was borne within a yard of the precipice, when I discovered my danger; and perceiving among them the murderer of Peter Green, and two others who had insulted me at the King's Arms, it instantly struck me that they had a design to throw me over the pier-head; which they might have done at this time, and yet have pleaded that I had been killed by accident. There was not a moment to lose. Vigorous on account of the danger, I darted forward. One of them, against whom I pushed myself, fell down. Their ranks were broken, and I escaped, not without blows, amidst their imprecations and abuse.”*

On strict examination, this incident is largely a private matter, a little local difficulty, between Peter Green's murderer and the man in pursuit of justice, Thomas Clarkson. But it has seemed to represent something about Liverpool and its attitude to Abolition. How sadly unsurprising that a bunch of rough, tough, drunken

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sailors in the port at the heart of Britain's slave trade should attempt to throw Britain's leading abolitionist off the pier-head. Yet Clarkson's visit to Liverpool caused a very real disturbance, which went far beyond tarnishing the reputation of a few rough and ready jack-tars and over-bearing ship's masters.

The part played by Thomas Clarkson in the movement to abolish the slave trade is well known.<sup>1,3</sup> In 1785, as a young man of 25 studying for clerical orders at Cambridge, he competed in an essay competition on the subject of the licitness of human slavery. Obtaining his material from "a deceased friend who had been in the trade" and from some works of the American Quaker, Anthony Benezet, his essay commanded the prize. Deciding that, if what he had written was true, then it was time that someone did something about it, there followed a chance meeting with Joseph Hancock, a Wisbech Quaker, which led to his introduction to James Phillips, printer and bookseller, and thus the publication of a modified version of his prize essay, *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*, in June 1786. Thus he fell in with the Quaker abolitionists who had an extensive network of national and international contacts through the Society of Friends. The London Quakers had previously circulated in 1784 and 1785 pamphlets critical of the trade – "The Case of Our Fellow Creatures the Oppressed Africans" and Anthony Benezet's work, "A Caution and warning to Great Britain and her colonies, in short a Representation of the Calamitous State of the Enslaved Negroes in British Dominions." Following discussions between Clarkson and Sir Charles and Lady Middleton and the Reverend James Ramsey of Teston in Kent, Clarkson joined the little London based group, which began to meet during 1786 and 1787, to promote abolition.<sup>1,3</sup>

Gathering reliable information on the nature of the slave trade became a priority for Clarkson and he was able to gain access to the Custom House books for the Port of London through his contact with the Middletons, but he needed to see those of Liverpool. This was arranged through the Quakers James & Richard Phillips – the latter a lawyer in Lincoln's Inn Fields and a former bookseller from Walthamstow. Using the Quaker network, James wrote to his friend William Rathbone, also a Quaker, and a Liverpool timber merchant, to obtain copies of the Custom House Records. From the Muster Rolls, Clarkson and Phillips discovered that "of the sailors going out to the African Coast in slave ships over half did not return, and of these one fifth perish. Of the others little could be determined ...".<sup>1,3</sup>

In May 1787, at a dinner arranged by Bennet Langton, which included Sir Charles Middleton, William Wilberforce, Isaac Hawkins-Browne, William Windham, Joshua Reynolds, & James Boswell, Wilberforce guardedly agreed to sponsor a bill in parliament. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May a Committee for the abolition of the slave trade was formed consisting of Granville Sharp, William Dillwyn, Samuel Hoare, George Harrison, John Lloyd, Joseph Woods, Thomas Clarkson, Richard Phillips, John Barton, Joseph Hooper, James Phillips, and Philip Sansom. Most were Quakers apart from Sharpe, Clarkson, and Sansom who were Anglicans. On the 24<sup>th</sup> May, at their first meeting in the new guise, £136 was received in subscriptions. In the meantime Clarkson prepared a précis of his essay for wider circulation – *A Summary View of the Slave Trade and the probable consequences of its Abolition* and 2000 copies were purchased for distribution to a list of subscribers.

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On June 7<sup>th</sup> the Committee, styling themselves “*The Committee instituted in June 1787 for effecting the abolition of the slave trade.*”,<sup>1,3</sup> received the poem “*The Wrongs of Africa*” from William Roscoe in Liverpool via his friend and correspondent, the Quaker John Barton. Roscoe offered the proceeds of publication to the cause. Roscoe and James Currie M.D. formed the nucleus of Liverpool’s abolitionists. The Liverpool group was not formally constituted as an abolitionist society and it was not open to a broader membership. In fact it seems to have been a variant as to membership of Currie and Roscoe’s literary coterie, the so-called *Octonium*.<sup>4</sup> If it was select, it was also composed of men who were highly respected among Liverpool’s wealthy merchant elite.

Meanwhile the London Committee decided that its object should be the abolition of the slave-trade and not abolition of the institution of slavery itself; as being more attainable, and not representing an attack on West Indian Property and thereby capable of dividing the opposition. Clarkson suggested that, with a parliamentary champion in place, and a parliamentary commission likely to be instituted, evidence would be required which should be obtained quickly before the question was agitated and avenues of investigation became closed. He proposed fact finding visits to Bristol, Liverpool, and Lancaster; a plan agreed at the meeting of the 12<sup>th</sup> of June. At one of these meetings Clarkson was awarded the first installment, £67 of his expenses to date, putting an end to all thoughts of a career other than as “*manager in the cause*”.<sup>1,3</sup>

### ***All Ship Shape and Bristol Fashion.***

Clarkson set out from London on horseback on June 25<sup>th</sup> 1787 for Bristol. The choice of Bristol as the first port of call may have reflected some logistical advantage, it may have been pure chance, or it could have been a reflection of an out of date view of the present state of trade in the various ports. The fact that Lancaster featured in the list at all suggests an out of date picture, having Bristol as the leading port outside London, and Lancaster, a significant third choice. Lancaster turned out to be hardly worth the effort of the journey. In Bristol his contact through the Quaker network was Harry Gandy, a conveyancer, who had sailed on two slaving voyages to Sierra Leone. The information that Clarkson sought was; knowledge of African produce for a collection he was building to demonstrate the potential for a morally legitimate commerce with Africa; evidence of the manner of obtaining slaves; the way slaves were transported; their treatment in the West Indies; and to become acquainted with the losses in the trade – and also with the losses and value of the trade in comparison to other mercantile trades. Of primary importance was the need to identify witnesses capable of testifying in person before parliament to all this information.<sup>1,3</sup>

In Bristol Clarkson found the Trade was well known, and every one had facts at their disposal, many “*execrated it*” but few thought of its abolition. From Henry Sulgar, a Moravian minister, he obtained documents relating to an alleged massacre of Africans at Old Calabar on the African Gold Coast some 20 years before. This incident would later re-emerge, in spectacular fashion, on his visit to Liverpool a month or more later. But, continuing his investigations in Bristol, he began to hear tales of barbarous treatment meted out to the crew of a recently arrived Guineaman.<sup>1</sup>

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He heard that the crew of the *Alfred* had been barbarously used and one young man by the name of Thomas, the surgeon's mate, had been repeatedly knocked down by the captain. As a result he had three times attempted to end his life by jumping overboard. For this he was chained to the deck of the ship night and day for some time and consequently his health had been so impaired it was thought he could not survive. It took some effort to find Thomas who was confined to bed, rambling and delirious, with his body, legs and thighs wrapped in flannel. Shortly afterwards Clarkson heard he had died. One of his Quaker contacts traced another young man named Dixon from the same vessel. Dixon confirmed everything he had heard and alleged that the captain treated the crew pretty much alike with respect to brutality. This led him to another seaman called Pyke, who had also been abused, and who could further confirm the accounts obtained so far. Finally Clarkson traced the one member of the crew, who all agreed, had not been ill treated during the voyage, James Bulpin. This young man, whom Clarkson believed could have no motive for disguising the truth, confirmed the ill usage of the seamen on the *Alfred*.<sup>1</sup>

*"I found him just setting off for the country. He stopped, however, to converse with me. He was a young man of very respectable appearance and of mild manners."*

Bulpin confirmed the accounts and told him that he thought one crew member named Charles Horseler might have died from being beaten over the breast with a knotted rope.<sup>1</sup> He also alleged that the captain, when a mate, had been tried in Barbadoes for the murder of a seaman but had escaped by bribing the principal witness to disappear.

This ghastly saga of brutality, related by each member of the crew he managed to trace began to work a profound effect on Clarkson's temperament.<sup>1</sup>

*"The reader will see, the further I went into the history of this voyage, the more dismal it became. One miserable account, when examined, only brought up another. I saw no end to inquiry. The great question was, what was I to do?"*

Clarkson thought of having the Captain arrested and spoke to Mr. Burges, an attorney, and Bristol's deputy town-clerk. Burges was sympathetic to Clarkson's cause but advised him *"to take notes of the case for my own private conviction, but to take no public cognizance of it."* Burges pointed out that sailors were off to sea again once their wages were spent. To pursue a case he would have to keep the whole crew at his own expense until the date of the trial which might be months away. In the meantime it was more than likely the merchants would inveigle his witnesses away by promoting them to boatswain or other office. Burges also pointed out that if he were to take up causes of hard usage in the trade he must *"take up that of nearly all who sailed in it; for that he only knew of one captain from the port in the Slave-trade, who did not deserve long ago to be hanged."* The result would be *"a labyrinth of expense, and difficulty... This advice, though it was judicious, ... I found it very difficult to adopt. My own disposition was naturally such, that whatever I engaged in I followed with more than ordinary warmth. I could not be supposed therefore, affected and interested as I then was, to be cool and tranquil on this occasion"*. For the time being he reluctantly accepted the advice after a *"very severe struggle in my own feelings on this account."*

So, although Clarkson reluctantly decided to watch and wait, he was already being pulled inexorably away from the patient discovery of facts about the nature of

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the slave trade that would provide the essential evidence in support of an Abolition Bill in parliament. Clarkson was being sucked emotionally into challenging the trade on a case-by-case, ship-by-ship basis; despite the sound advice of the town clerk that the legal difficulties he was at risk of piling up would be never ending.

However, it proved to be slow grinding work getting evidence against the slave trade. As to usable testimony, he had little, and as to witnesses prepared to testify before parliament, he had none. His friends in Bristol, seem not to have had, or could not persuade to come forward, any contacts with significant inside knowledge of the trade. So he broke his visit to Bristol with a journey to Bridgewater, the source of an abolitionist petition on the slave trade in 1784, which had come to his attention. Returning to Bristol he was soon struck by the small size of some of the slave vessels.<sup>1</sup>

Clarkson was boarding some of the slave ships to study their construction and dimensions and found one sloop of 25 tons destined to carry 70 slaves and another of only 11 tons for 30 slaves. He was told that these were not to act as tenders on the coast but would transport their own slaves to the West Indies. He was also told that one would be sold in the West Indies as a pleasure vessel “*and that the seamen belonging to them were to be permitted to come home by what is usually called the run.*”

For all the many people he met in Bristol, only his original contact, Harry Gandy, was prepared to come forward as a witness. Even men retired from the trade were unwilling to come forward for fear of incriminating themselves. Anxious to find someone willing to give evidence who was still actively engaged in the trade he said, “*I persisted for weeks together under this hope*”.<sup>1</sup> Clarkson was eventually introduced to a ship’s surgeon named Gardiner of the *Pilgrim*, whose owner, James McTaggart, had already pointed out Clarkson to him as, “*someone he would wish him to avoid.*” From Gardiner he got some details about the middle passage and further evidence of the barbarous usage of the seamen by the officers aboard the slave-ships. Gardiner told him that they were about to sail, but that seven men brought aboard drunk by the Mates out of Bristol’s Marsh Street taverns, had jumped ship in one of the boats.<sup>1</sup> In the cold light of morning, with a rum induced hangover, the prospect of an African voyage must have loomed in a rather less attractive light than it had the night before.

His next informant was located after overhearing small talk about an African voyage in the Exchange. By having one of these men followed for a couple of days he secured an interview with James Arnold, assistant surgeon in the voyage of the *Alexander* in 1785, also owned by James McTaggart, and subsequently as surgeon in the voyage of the *Little Pearl* in 1786, whose owner was William Tapscott. He too had “*been cautioned about falling in with me*”. From Arnold he learned that during the voyage of the *Alexander* 11 crew had deserted at Bonny and a further 9 had died. Arnold also told tales of cruelty to seamen and slaves during the middle passage. As far as giving oral testimony went, Arnold would only agree to sign an affidavit and this only a matter of hours before he was due to sail.<sup>1</sup> This would have been around the 9<sup>th</sup> of August when the *Ruby*, Arnold’s next vessel, cleared out of Bristol.<sup>5</sup>

These men had given Clarkson valuable information, and both had agreed to keep journals during their present voyages, sent out, in Clarkson’s words as

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“*sentinels in the enemies’ camp*”. Despite this Clarkson still had no reliable witness who could testify in person, before parliament, about the nature of the trade as currently practiced. Indeed, it seemed that he had little prospect of getting anyone to come forward, except under circumstances open to allegations of bribery. Sailors such as these could only testify if they did not sail, and would need to be kept, at some expense, in readiness to testify at some unknown time in the future. By now Clarkson was exhausted. He had been staying up until 2 and 3 o’clock almost every morning, either writing up the events of the day, or visiting the Marsh Street taverns in search of further information and leads. He reluctantly decided to spend two or three days in Monmouth, by way of relaxation. Here, assisted by a local clergyman, he began raising a petition in support of abolition. Returning to Bristol he found his friends had secured him an interview with one Alexander Falconbridge, a guinea surgeon, who had completed four voyages to Africa, in the *Tartar*, the *Alexander*, and the *Emilia*.<sup>1</sup>

*“I asked him if he had any objection to give me an account of the cruelties, which were said to be connected with the Slave-trade. He answered, without any reserve, that he had not, for that he had now done with it. Never were any words more welcome to my ears than these – ‘Yes - I have done with the trade’ - and he said also, that he was free to give me information concerning it. Was he not then one of the very persons, whom I had so long been seeking, but in vain?”*

Falconbridge later testified before Parliament, and a pamphlet detailing his experiences, written with the editorial help of the Phillips’s, appeared some time later.<sup>6</sup> In conversation, it seems, this man could give a good account of the enormities of the trade, confirming in some detail much of what Clarkson had already heard;

*“he confirmed the various violent and treacherous methods of procuring them in their own country; their wretched condition, in consequence of being crowded together in the passage; their attempts to rise in defence of their own freedom, and, when this was impracticable, to destroy themselves by the refusal of sustenance, by jumping overboard into the sea, and in other ways; the Act also of their situation upon their minds, by producing insanity and various diseases; and the cruel manner of disposing of them in the West Indies, and of separating relatives and friends.”*

The veracity of the man’s testimony was confirmed in Clarkson’s own mind by his favourable account of just one among all of Bristol’s slave-ship captains, Captain Frazer. Captain Frazer was the master of the voyages made by the *Tartar* (1780 & 82) and the *Emilia* (1783 & 84).<sup>5</sup> The landlord of the Seven Stars, Mr. Thompson, had already informed him *“that Frazer was the only man sailing out of that port for slaves, who had not been guilty of cruelty to his seamen”* And the attorney and magistrates’ clerk Mr. Burges had alluded to this man, when he observed, *“that he knew but one captain in the trade, who did not deserve long ago to be hanged.”* Finally when Falconbridge discussed the voyage of the *Alexander* Clarkson believed he had hit upon an account that could be corroborated.<sup>1</sup>

*“Mr. Falconbridge, however, stated, that though he had been thus fortunate in the Tartar and Emilia, he had been as unfortunate in the Alexander; for he believed there were no instances upon naval record, taken altogether, of greater barbarity, than of that which had been exercised towards the seamen in this voyage.”*

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Falconbridge's account, Clarkson believed, independently confirmed that of Arnold who had been surgeon's mate to Falconbridge in the *Alexander*. From these accounts Clarkson significantly extended his knowledge of the effects of these African voyages on the well being of the slave-ship crews.<sup>1</sup> Many left the slave-ships in the West Indies in such a weak, ulcerated and diseased state that they perished and some returned home in the same state. Falconbridge said this was true of the *Alexander* and many others which he could confirm from having spent 12 months as a pupil at Bristol Infirmary where the greatest numbers of patients were from the slave ships.

Clarkson considered this of great importance, "*for it showed that they who were reported dead upon the muster-rolls, were not all that were lost to the country by the prosecution of this wicked trade. Indeed, it was of so much importance, that in all my future interviews with others, which were for the purpose of collecting evidence, I never forgot to make it a subject of inquiry.*"

Clarkson was overjoyed when Falconbridge firmly agreed to be a witness in any inquiry.<sup>1</sup>

*"He answered me boldly, and at once, that he had left the trade upon principle, and that he would state all he knew concerning it, either publicly or privately, and at any time when he should be called upon to do it. This answer produced such an effect upon me, after all my former disappointments, that I felt it all over my frame. It operated like a sudden shock, which often disables the impressed person for a time, so the joy I felt rendered me quite useless, as to business, for the remainder of the day."*

Clarkson described Alexander Falconbridge as "*athletic and resolute*" and, in reporting progress to the committee in London he proposed using Falconbridge to assist him in his investigations in Liverpool and to pay him £10 compensation for the loss of his time at his Bristol surgeon's practice. The Committee agreed to do this, provided that Falconbridge "*is really a man of good character*" and adding in Quaker fashion, "*I hope the zeal and animation with which thou hast taken up the cause will be accompanied by temper and moderation*". Under the rising tide of new enormities and shocking revelations "*temper and moderation*" would have been asking much.<sup>3</sup>

It was shortly after this that he heard again from Thompson, the landlord at The Seven Stars, and another account of sailor's attempting to jump-ship, on this occasion running scared of the corrupt hiring practices of the ship's masters who were obtaining men's signatures or marks on articles of indenture that they were not allowed to see. He agreed to rescue a Mr. Sherrif who seemed to be a friend of the landlord. This man confirmed stories of desertions from the *Prince* related earlier by Thompson and the peculiar barbarity of its captain who even seemed to indulge his barbarous ways within a British port. But now Clarkson began to pursue the new line of enquiry opened up by Falconbridge's forthright allegations; that of the seamen's health as affected by these African voyages. He heard of the ship *Thomas* now nearly a year from the coast in which the sailors had arrived home in a "*crippled and deplorable state.*"<sup>1</sup> One had caught fever and the inflammation resulting had reached his eyes and he was blind. Another was lame from badly ulcerated legs.

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*“The third was a mere spectre. I think he was the most pitiable object I ever saw. I considered him as irrecoverably gone. They all complained to me of their bad usage on board the **Thomas**. They said they had heard of my being in Bristol, and they hoped I would not leave it, without inquiring into the murder of William Lines.”*

Against all the cautionary advice he had received from the attorney, Mr. Burges, and knowing that he cannot expect the society to bear the expense of legal proceedings outside their remit, Clarkson decided to take the cause of William Lines before the magistrates. Lines was alleged to have been beaten to death by the mate of the **Thomas**, and Lines’ mother had managed to procure apparently reliable witnesses to the crime. There was a dark and threatening atmosphere in the court that day.<sup>1</sup> On the bench alongside the mayor were one or two slave merchants and two or three West India merchants who gave him savage looks. They were whispering to the mayor when one of them said aloud fixing his gaze on Clarkson,

*“Scandalous reports had lately been spread, but sailors were not used worse in Guineamen than in other vessels.”*

Another said to the mayor, *“that he had known captain Vicars a long time; that he was an honourable man, and would not allow such usage in his ship. There were always vagabonds to hatch up things,”* to which Clarkson replied, *“You, sir, may know many things which I do not. But this I know, that if you do not do your duty, you are, amenable to a higher court.”*

Clarkson remarked in a footnote that Vicars had been purser of the **Brothers** and the **Alfred** and had sent their captains out a second voyage knowing of their barbarities in the former. He was also the purser of the ship **Thomas**, where the murder had been committed. All of these vessels belonged to the Bristol merchant James Jones. Captain Vicars’ first command was of the **Thomas** in 1785, perhaps he had worked his way to the rank of captain aboard Jones’ vessels.<sup>5</sup> Captain Vicars was summoned and deposed that, although there may have been bad usage, the man in question died of the flux. However, the mate was arrested on the evidence heard and jailed until an Admiralty court could be convened. This public exposure caused the attitudes of those involved in the trade to polarize around him and his own feelings of revulsion became almost unbearable. What was perhaps worse, he was now only in a position to collect evidence from below decks, and concerning abuse of seamen. Any possibility of obtaining a broader view of the trade from men in senior positions was irrevocably closed.<sup>1</sup>

*“...the slave-captains and mates, who used to meet me suddenly, used as suddenly to start from me, indeed to the other side of the pavement, as if I had been a wolf, or tiger, or some dangerous beast of prey. Such of them as saw me before hand, used to run up the cross streets or lanes, which were nearest to them, to get away.”*

Seamen began to come to him seeking redress. One came from the **Alexander** complaining of ill treatment *“when Mr. Falconbridge had been the surgeon of her.”* Three came from her next voyage under a different master. Two came from the **Africa**, two from the **Fly**, two from the **Wasp**, one from the **Little Pearl**, and three from the **Pilgrim** or **Princess**. The revelations were taking their toll.

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*“The different scenes of barbarity, which these represented to me, greatly added to the affliction of my mind. My feelings became now almost insupportable. I was agonized to think that this trade should last another day. I was in a state of agitation from morning till night. I determined I would soon leave Bristol. I saw nothing but misery in the place. I had collected now, I believed, all the evidence it would afford, and to stay in it a day longer than was necessary, would be only an interruption for so much time both of my happiness and of my health. I determined therefore to do only two or three things, which I thought to be proper, and to depart in a few days.”*

Clarkson sought some relief from the nightmare that was beginning to overwhelm his feelings by spending a few days at Bath to secure the editor of the local paper for the cause. He then returned to Bristol to spend a few days making his reports to the Committee and it was then that he proposed taking Falconbridge on his visit to Liverpool.<sup>1,3</sup>

### ***The Liverpool Octonium.***

And so Clarkson moved on to Liverpool, taking in visits to Gloucester, Worcester and Chester on the way, securing support from Newspaper editors, clergymen and the like as he went. Unfortunately Clarkson abridged his own account of his visit to Liverpool, *“It may not, perhaps, be necessary to enter so largely into my proceedings at Liverpool as at Bristol”*.<sup>1</sup> More than unfortunate, Ellen Gibson Wilson, Clarkson’s biographer, in a few brief thrusts, portrays Liverpool, the capital city of the British Slave Trade, as corrupt to the very heart, which could, at best, muster a handful of weak-willed, unprincipled reformists in favour of abolition, who, what was even worse, were active collaborators with the slave traders.<sup>3</sup>

*“Abolition sympathizers existed in Liverpool but they were less active and far less open than Clarkson’s Bristol friends. Here most had friendly business links with the slave trade, and whilst they disliked it in principal, they favoured a gradual reformist approach. Their writings on the subject were usually unsigned. At least eight Liverpoolians subscribed to the abolition society but no supporting committee was established.”*

These are curious words. The Liverpool abolitionists are less active and less open than the Bristol folk, and yet pulling together the needed evidence against the slave trade in Bristol was altogether an uphill struggle, the whole mitigated only by the fortunate discovery of the resolute Mr. Falconbridge. That the Liverpool abolitionists are gradual reformists is utterly damning of course, the whole world, and his wife, knows full well that this approach can never work, only the most sudden and violent overthrow has any chance of success in reforming any institution. Equally, the success of the sudden abolitionists, such as Clarkson and Wilberforce, is well known and justly lauded, it merely taking another twenty years to bring about the abolition of the slave-trade, a further 25 years to abolish the institution of slavery within the British Empire, at huge cost in compensating, not the slaves, but the slave owners, and a further 30 years before a massive and bloody civil war erupted over the issue in the United States. Such is the nature of overwhelming success.

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Clarkson did not share his biographer's dim view of the friends of abolition in Liverpool; on the other hand, his own view of the trade had darkened steadily and inexorably during his visit to Bristol. He had had no success in penetrating the current practices of the trade from anywhere but below decks and he had experienced open hostility from merchants and officials. His friends in Bristol though helpful had not been able to give him access to the trade at any significant level. The best of the crop was the surgeon Falconbridge. Clarkson was almost overwhelmed by the impression that the evil philosophy at the heart of the slave-trade was spread to every extremity and he could find only one report of an officer in the trade whose reputation was not utterly blackened. "*Now nothing could be related so barbarous of this traffic, which might not instantly be believed*" In such spirits he set out for Liverpool accompanied by the resolute Mr. Falconbridge.<sup>1</sup>

The sympathizers in Liverpool whom Clarkson and Falconbridge set out to meet were:- James Currie, Jonathan Binns, Daniel Daulby, William Rathbone, William Roscoe, and John Yates.

James Currie M. D. was physician to the Liverpool Infirmary. Although nowhere publicly named he is believed by most authorities to be the subscriber designated as anonymous in a list of Liverpool subscribers. Apprenticed at the age of 15 to William Cunninghame & Co, merchants of Glasgow, as a tobacco factor on Cabin Point, on the James River, near Williamsburgh, Virginia, his early career was cut short by the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War. In 1777 he returned to study medicine at Glasgow University, graduating in 1780 and after some attempts at other posts, decided to take on the medical practice of the retiring Dr Matthew Dobson in Liverpool. Currie was a radical and a dissenter and an honorary member of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society and well known to other radicals of his day such as Dr's Bell and Perceval of Manchester. He was the founder member of a literary coterie, which included some, but not all, of the Liverpool abolitionists, who were steadily raising the artistic and literary pretensions of the town. He was an enterprising man, elected to the Liverpool Dispensary in 1781, he married the daughter of William Wallace an Irish merchant in Liverpool who was involved in the West Indian, Irish and American trades on January 9<sup>th</sup> 1783. He could not touch his marriage settlement of £4000 but his father-in-law gave him £2000 in addition. The marriage register was signed by Mary Earle, Elizabeth Kent, Thomas Earle, and John Lightbody. He lived on York Street close to the Wallace mansion.<sup>4</sup> In 1783 he was responsible for a mass smallpox inoculation program that by the end of the year had treated 11,247 people.<sup>7</sup>

That Currie had "*friendly business links with the slave trade*"<sup>3</sup> is beyond dispute, though surprisingly hard to be specific about, and no doubt why he is not damned with more certainty of purpose by his detractors. James Currie had, as a patient, Thomas Earle, a merchant in many trades, but including extensive slaving interests and who was also president of the Liverpool Infirmary. Thomas Earle signed the register on his marriage to William Wallace's daughter in 1783. No doubt many of his wealthy patients were involved in the slave trade. "*I get a little practice but most of my patients seem to die out of spite.*"<sup>8</sup> His involvement in the Hospital represents another important point of contact with the effects of the Slave Trade, given the effect of these voyages on the health of the crews. Around 1790 Currie began a correspondence with Hannah Greg the young bride of Samuel Greg,

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the Manchester Cotton Spinner, following her marriage in 1789 when she moved to Manchester. It seems reasonable to suppose the continuation of some earlier friendship and perhaps some involvement in her education.<sup>8</sup> Hannah Greg was the sister-in-law of Thomas Hodgson, “*an eminent merchant of Liverpool.*” Samuel Greg was also a friend and correspondent of Currie. Currie, the physician, seemed to have a curious enthusiasm for cotton mills. Hannah Greg’s mother, Elizabeth Lightbody worshipped at the Kaye St Chapel, of which Currie was a member. The executors of the elder Elizabeth Lightbody’s will were Thomas Pares, the wife of her middle daughter, Agnes, and John Lightbody, her brother-in-law, who witnessed Currie’s marriage. William Roscoe was her solicitor and drew up her will.<sup>9</sup> It is inconceivable that there were not friendly relations between all of these people and thus with the wider Liverpool Merchant community. Several years later Currie published an anonymous and supposedly seditious article critical of Pitt’s policy on the war with Revolutionary France – the so-called Jasper Wilson Letter which was a plea for peace based on the devastation of Liverpool’s trade caused by the war.<sup>10</sup> His authorship of the Jasper Wilson letter was exposed by George Chalmers, in a scurrilous pro-government publication. Currie, in discussing this incident in a statement of his political beliefs and actions written close to the end of his life, makes quite plain his relationship with those engaged in the African Trade.<sup>8</sup>

*“From this time forth I have never seen Mr. Chalmers again, except once in a large company in Liverpool about the year 1791 or 1792, into which I was asked to meet him at dinner, with a party of the principal African merchants of the town. I did not go to dinner on account of some professional engagements, but in the afternoon called in, when, finding Mr. C. in the midst of a long and detailed account of his services in defeating a late attempt in Parliament for the abolition of the African trade, I paid my compliments to him personally, and to the company present, and speedily took my leave. The truth was, that my sentiments on the nature of this question were universally known to the gentlemen present, several of whom were my personal friends, not to correspond with those delivered by Mr. Chalmers, and though my presence might not prevent the discourse from going on, it might in several respects be embarrassing.”*

Nothing could be more plain, as to the nature of the man and his professional relationships with the African merchants; some were his personal friends who knew his views on the subject.

Dr Jonathan Binns was born in Crawshawbooth, Nr Hasslingden and was first apprenticed as a Surgeon Apothecary to Abraham Sutcliffe of Settle and later employed by Messrs Lee & Bond of Liverpool. Around 1770 he attended the University of Edinburgh to study medicine graduating in 1772. He went to Liverpool in December 1772 to practice medicine living first in Church Street and then from 1781 in Hanover Street. He became a physician to the Liverpool Infirmary and was a well-respected and prominent Quaker. He gave up his medical practice in Liverpool in 1795 to take up an appointment to manage Ackworth School for Friends Not in Affluent Circumstances. In 1805 after a difficult ten years with the school governors he returned to medical practice in Lancaster where he died in 1812. He was prominent in the abolition movement and Clarkson reported that he had been the victim of some unspecified plot by the slave traders of the town.<sup>11</sup>

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Daniel Daulby, was William Roscoe's brother in Law, an auditor of the Liverpool Infirmary, a successful brewer and an assiduous art collector who built up a large collection containing works by Reynolds and Rembrandt.<sup>12</sup>

William Rathbone traded in timber and many other goods, and had already imported the first American Cotton by 1784. The elder William Rathbone (William III) was a Quaker but his son William IV became Unitarian on his marriage to Samuel Greg's daughter Elizabeth. Clarkson's comment in his 'History' that Rathbone was about to renounce supplying timber to the slave trade just before his death in 1789, implies that he had, at least in the past, supplied masts, spars and other timber required for fitting out and perhaps constructing slave-ships.<sup>13</sup>

William Roscoe, lawyer in the firm of Aspinall, Roscoe and Lace, was without doubt involved in handling the legal affairs of many slave traders. His signature is to be found on legal documents drawn up for Thomas Hodgson.<sup>14</sup> He was the solicitor acting for Elizabeth Lightbody, who made particular reference in her will to the provision to be made for Thomas Hodgson's children.<sup>9</sup> Roscoe finally quit the profession in disgust in 1796. He mentioned his resolve to be shot of his law practice in a letter to his wife written from Carlisle where he was once again dragged away from home on business.<sup>15</sup>

*"Believe me, I am almost disgusted with my profession, as it affords me a continual opportunity of observing the folly and villainy of mankind. I must, however, submit to my task till such time as Providence shall think proper to enable me to dispense with it; and as soon as that is the case, it is my fixed resolution to withdraw myself from so hateful an employment."*

Roscoe was the London Committee's initial contact in Liverpool. He was in contact with John Barton of the committee and had been for years. John Barton had married Maria Done, Roscoe's first sweetheart who died in 1784 and they had maintained a friendly correspondence from that time. It was in a poem entitled Mount Pleasant dedicated to Miss Done and written in 1777 that Roscoe first attacked the slave trade.<sup>15</sup>

*There Afric's swarthy sons their toils repeat,  
Beneath the fervors of the noon-tide heat;  
Torn from each joy that crown'd their native soil,  
No sweet reflections mitigate their toil:  
From morn to eve by rigorous hands oppress,  
Dull fly their hours, of every hope unblest  
Till broke with labour, helpless and forlorn,  
From their weak grasp the lingering morsel torn,  
The reed-built hovels' friendly shade denied,  
The jest of folly and the scorn of pride;  
Drooping beneath meridian suns they lie,  
Lift the faint head, and bend the imploring eye,  
Till death in kindness from the tortured breast  
Calls the free spirit to the realms of rest.  
Shame to mankind but shame to Britons most,  
Who all the sweets of Liberty can boast;  
Yet, deaf to every human claim, deny*

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*That bliss to others which themselves enjoy;  
Life's bitter draught with harsher bitter fill,  
Blast every joy, and add to every ill;  
The trembling limbs with galling iron bind,  
Nor loose the heavier bondage of the mind."*

The Reverend John Yates was a dissenting minister at the Kaye Street Unitarian Chapel, the place of worship of James Currie and Elizabeth Lightbody, which he had taken over in 1777 following training at Warrington Academy. In 1777 he married Elizabeth Bostock widow of a city physician and the daughter of John Brooks Ashton a Liverpool Merchant. Marriage brought him wealth, some of which he invested in property. He seems to have had somewhat ecumenical financial interests for a priest. He is said to have made a killing in tobacco during the revolutionary war and to have been a secret investor in a Liverpool bank, which participation enabled his son to join in 1801, the bank then trading as Fletcher, Yates & Co. Yates naturally will have had a fair selection of slave traders in his congregation, many of whom were to be, in the very near future, considerably upset by a public demonstration of his philosophy.<sup>16</sup>

The list of subscribers is almost the same as Currie's Liverpool literary coterie, but not quite, as, along with Currie, Rathbone, Roscoe, and Yates, this group included the Rev. William Shepherd, Professor Smyth, and Dr John Rutter.<sup>4</sup> Shepherd's absence is explained by the fact that he had not yet arrived in Liverpool to take over the ministry of Gateacre Unitarian chapel,<sup>16</sup> and perhaps similar considerations apply to the others. William Shepherd composed the memorial epitaph for Thomas Hodgson's wife Elizabeth which is to be found on prominent display in Caton Church to which it was moved following the destruction of Caton Chapel. It is not an adapted or borrowed verse but a deliberate composition for the epitaph.<sup>17</sup>

Much as Ms. Wilson's account eulogises Clarkson's work on behalf of abolition even she cannot disguise the fact that something went badly awry in Liverpool. She notes that there was no offer of hospitality, not that any such offer was mentioned by Clarkson as forthcoming in Bristol, but it is clear that in Liverpool he stayed in the King's Arms until this became decidedly uncomfortable. She notes that "*his activities disturbed them*"<sup>3</sup> but if Clarkson noticed any coolness in his reception or was conscious of raising any hackles he does not mention it.<sup>1</sup>

On June 11th 1787, the day before the plan for Clarkson's tour of the slave-ports was agreed by the London Committee, Currie wrote to his friend Lieutenant Graham Moore, R. N. He rather coyly introduced Roscoe's Abolitionist Poem to him, since it is only days since he sent it to the Committee, complete with his own introduction, and he spelled out his understanding of the growing abolition movement. He was clearly on top of developments through his contacts with the London committee. But the difference between his conception of how abolition will be achieved seems to have run ahead of that of the London Committee.<sup>8</sup>

*"...there is a poem lately published, which has been sent me from London, entitled 'The Wrongs of Africa,' that is well worth your perusal. Some say it is Cowper's; others, I hear, ascribe it to Hayley; but, be that as it may, it has very*

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*considerable poetical beauties, and breathes throughout a noble indignation and an ardent humanity.*

*The following description, the beauties of which a sailor will best appreciate, introduces an affecting story: -*

*Safe on the sheltering coast of wide Benin,  
The stately vessel rode; and now the sun,  
Deep in the western flood had quench'd his fires;  
And the wan moon in Heaven's opposing scale,  
Hung her pale lamp, that o'er the breezy main  
Scatter'd its broken radiance. - All was still  
When dim, beneath the sober beam of night,  
Was seen the light canoe, that tow'rds the ship  
Its hasty course directed, &c*

*I write in a rambling way, and therefore you must expect me to be abrupt and unconnected. There is to be an application to parliament next session in favour of the friendless Africans. Wilberforce is to bring the subject forward; and his plan, I hear, is to propose that the traffic in human flesh shall first be restricted, and, in the course of a limited number of years, entirely abolished."*

Clarkson briefly met the Liverpool abolitionists during the first few days of his stay. William Rathbone seems to have been Clarkson's first introduction, and although they had not met, they were not complete strangers as Rathbone had earlier supplied him with the Liverpool Muster Rolls. He then met Isaac Hadwen a "Friend" whom he had met in London when Hadwen was attending the Quaker Yearly Meeting. He also called on Roscoe because he was the author of *The Wrongs of Africa* and Roscoe introduced him to Currie. In addition he met Edward Rushton, the blind Liverpool poet and member of Roscoe and Currie's literary circle.<sup>1</sup> Rushton seems to have been a particular favourite of Currie who said, some years later, on the subject of a memorial to the poet Burns,<sup>8</sup>

*"Besides my friend Roscoe's monody, I have got another by Rushton of this town, a truly original genius. He lost his sight on the coast of Africa, whither he sailed several voyages. He is truly a poet, as you will one day see."*

Rushton, born in Liverpool in 1766, had a suitably pathetic history. Apprenticed at 16 to the notorious firm of slavers and privateers, Gregson & Co, he was promoted to 2<sup>nd</sup> mate after seizing the helm of a ship on its approach into Liverpool thereby averting catastrophe. Whilst on a slaving voyage to Guinea he befriended an African named Quamina, whom he taught to read. He and Quamina were among the crew of a small boat sent ashore which was upset and as Rushton swam towards a small water cask to which Quamina was clinging, *"the generous negro saw that his friend was too much exhausted to reach the cask he pushed it towards him, bade him good bye, and sank to rise no more."*

On a later voyage there was an outbreak of ophthalmia amongst the slaves. Rushton is said to have contracted the disease as a result of his efforts to help the victims. As a consequence he *"entirely lost the sight of his left eye, and the right was covered with an opacity of the cornea."* In 1782, he published *"The Dismembered Empire,"* a poem hostile to the American war; and in 1787 he published *"West India Eclogues"*, dedicated to Dr. Porteus, Bishop of Chester. He was a radical, a supporter of the French Revolution and at one time editor of the

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Liverpool Herald and a founder of the Liverpool School for the Blind.<sup>16</sup> Rushton was probably also a friend of the elder Elizabeth Lightbody, a woman noted for her charity, and who conspicuously left money to the School for the Blind in her will. Clarkson mentions meeting each of these in turn with warmth and there is no sign of any rancour or bitterness of any kind.

Clarkson briefly recounted his first days in Liverpool, the samples of African produce he had been given, and his time spent in the Custom's House looking over the muster rolls and the lists of imports and exports. At the Custom's House he discovered an annual summary card of the port traffic. From this he learned that during the year 1772 there were 100 sailings to Africa when dock duties amounted to £4,552, whereas in 1779, when there were only 11 clearances for Africa, dock duties of £4,957 were payable. From which Clarkson concluded that the experiment with the cessation of the African Trade had already been made and the effects were not nearly so catastrophic as might have been supposed. This example was used a great deal by the abolitionists; even Currie used it in a letter to Wilberforce.<sup>1,8</sup> The card of course made no mention of the serious insurrection of guinea sailors in 1775 resulting from the downturn in trade. It is far from clear that the conclusions drawn from these figures are sound; not only is the African trade disrupted by the American Revolution but so too is the lucrative trade with America.<sup>18</sup>

Clarkson's next discovery in Liverpool, of which he made much, were the tools of the trade which had somehow been overlooked in Bristol; the handcuffs, the leg irons, the thumb screws and finally, piece de resistance, the speculum oris for opening the jaws of the slaves for force feeding. He reported his growing feeling that the people of the town were even more inured to the evils of the trade than in Bristol because of its relatively greater size. Horrific tales were on everybody's lips.<sup>1</sup>

## *The Massacre at Old Calabar.*

Apart from the notorious incident on the Quayside, Clarkson is remarkably coy about what took place in Liverpool, with little in his account to indicate that anything had been amiss. However, something about his visit so incensed James Currie that he attacked Clarkson and his methods in the public domain and in private letters. Something rather curious must have happened for Currie to become so infuriated and to transform cordial reception into public invective. Clarkson's account first of all mentions his introduction to Robert Norris, a former slave trader and slave ship captain.<sup>1</sup> William Rathbone introduced him to Norris, "*who was looking out to supply me with intelligence, but who was desirous that I should not be imposed upon, and that I should get it from the fountain-head.*"

Far from not receiving as much help in Liverpool as he received in Bristol, as alleged by Wilson, he was cordially received by William Rathbone and straightaway introduced to a man who had been at the very heart of the slave trade for many years. This was no Jack Tar or Ship's Surgeon but a former slave-ship captain and erstwhile merchant. Robert Norris, became a slave-ship captain as the master of the *Unity* between 1769 and 1774, owned by a leading slave trading consortium including, Richard Savage, Thomas Hodgson (Doddlespool), John Dobson, James Lowe, John Copeland, John Green, and James Money Penny. His

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voyages primarily operated between Liverpool, Wydah or Anamobu, and South Carolina. Between 1773 and 1777 he became an investor in his own right, taking a share in a number of vessels including *Assistance*, *Britannia*, *Society*, and *Unity*. These voyages took slaves at Anamobu, Wydah or the Isles de Loss but, with the changed disposition of the American colonies, discharged in Jamaica.<sup>5</sup> At about this time Norris set up a tool making factory whose trade was spoiled by the collapse in trade caused by the American War. He then seems to have kept in touch with the African Company in London, advising on company matters and appointments, including the provisioning of Cape Coast Castle. The report of Privy Council during the parliamentary enquiry into the slave trade described him as a Carolina Merchant. He described himself to Hawkesbury, President of the Board of Trade, as the Commercial Agent for Liverpool but by this time, a curious transformation had taken place.<sup>21</sup>

His importance to Clarkson was such that he visited Norris five or six times, in his home, to hear the information on the trade that he had to offer. Norris proved to be, *“a man of quick penetration, and of good talents, which he had cultivated to advantage, and he had a pleasing address both as to speech and manners. He received me with great politeness, and offered me all the information I desired”*.

During these interviews, Norris divulged much valuable information, and what was more important he promised to be a credible witness for abolition. Norris gave Clarkson a detailed account of the potential of African produce to replace the trade in slaves, and some insight into how the present trade in slaves was inhibiting the development of these alternatives. Norris also gave him a manuscript, *“The History of the King of Dahomey,”* which he had been preparing and which contained valuable information about the way slaves were obtained. Norris apparently understood the African language of this region and had pieced together his history from the accounts of slaves aboard his own vessels. Not only was Norris willing to discuss these issues with Clarkson in private, he was prepared to assert his views in the presence of at least one other African Merchant. During one conversation a Mr. Coupland was present who bridled at Norris’s remarks and tried to defend the trade. Norris answered him *“in a solid manner.”*<sup>21</sup> Coupland is probably Clarkson’s misspelling of John Copeland, brother in law of Thomas Earle, and a member of the Company of Merchants trading to Africa who had been involved in many partnerships in the trade for many years; some of them with Robert Norris. Norris also testified about the cruelties practiced on the seamen and the effect of the trade on their health but Clarkson felt in no need of this testimony. On the other hand he was particularly pleased that Norris supplied him with his thoughts on the framing of an Act of Parliament to limit and ultimately abolish the slave trade in a gradual manner which Clarkson summarized;<sup>1</sup>

*“No vessel under a heavy penalty to supply foreigners with slaves.*

*Every vessel to pay to government a tax for a register on clearing out to supply our own islands with slaves.*

*Every such vessel to be prohibited from purchasing or bringing home any of the productions of Africa.*

*Every such vessel to be prohibited from bringing home a passenger, or any article of produce, from the West India.*

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*A bounty to be given to every vessel trading in the natural productions of Africa. This bounty to be paid in part out of the tax arising from the registers of the slave vessels.*

*Certain establishments to be made by government in Africa, in the Bananas, in the Isles de Los, on the banks of the Camaranca, and in other places, for the encouragement and support of the new trade to be substituted there."*

The question arises as to whether this was a policy formulated by the Liverpool abolitionists or simply Robert Norris' private thoughts on the matter. Clarkson's account makes clear that this was the testimony that Rathbone was particularly solicitous that he should have, from the fountain head – "*the perilous fountainhead*" as Ellen Gibson Wilson puts it - without being imposed upon. And yet not only did this curious man turn his back on the abolitionists, and fail to follow through with his personal testimony before Parliament, but he appeared among the Liverpool Delegation to Parliament singing like a canary from the slave-traders' hymn sheet!<sup>19</sup> Clarkson recorded Norris's evidence at some length and asked his readers to take particular note of it precisely because Robert Norris appeared before the Parliamentary Enquiry and gave evidence in diametric opposition to his personal testimony in Liverpool. So, far from being the great coup sought by Clarkson, and which at first sight he clearly seemed to be – a cultivated and articulate slave trader willing to come forward and publicly condemn the trade – instead he appeared for the Liverpool delegation and spoke in favour of the trade.

As a result of his interviews with Norris, Clarkson bumped into a man named Captain Chaffers. Chaffers had seen him with Norris, learned of his mission, and approved of it. Clarkson seems to have been informed that Chaffers was in, or had been in, the West-India trade.<sup>1</sup> It may well be that he had invested in this trade, however, Edward Chaffers had also invested in the African trade from around 1764 until 1776 with major African merchant houses run by John Crosbie and William Davenport.<sup>5</sup> Chaffers in turn introduced him to Captain Ambrose Lace, who had been long in the trade, and who could give him accurate information about it. They met and, in discussing the produce of Africa, Lace mentioned that Mahogany grew at Calabar and began to describe the habits of the tree. Clarkson in a sudden moment of revelation made the connection between Lace's account of Calabar and the horrific story, complete with documentary evidence, given to him in Bristol by the Moravian minister, Henry Sulgar – the Massacre at Old Calabar.<sup>1</sup>

*"A kind of horror came over me. His name became directly associated in my mind with the place. It almost instantly occurred to me, that he commanded the **Edgar** out of Liverpool, when the dreadful massacre as has been related, took place. Indeed I seemed to be so confident of it, that, attending more to my feelings than to my reason at this moment I accused him with being concerned in it. This produced great confusion among us, for he looked incensed at Captain Chaffers, as if he had introduced me to him for this purpose. Captain Chaffers again seemed to be all astonishment that I should have known of this circumstance, and to be vexed that I should have mentioned it in such a manner. I was also in a state of trembling myself. Captain Lace could only say it was a bad business. But he never defended himself, nor those concerned in it. And we soon parted, to the great joy of us all".*

Clarkson reported this appalling incident at some length in his account of his visit to Bristol and recognized at once that it was a powerful propaganda weapon, a

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bloody story of greed and folly, pregnant with wider implications.<sup>1</sup> In 1767 the ships *Indian Queen*, *Duke of York*, *Nancy*, and *Concord*, of Bristol, the *Edgar*, of Liverpool, and the *Canterbury*, of London, lay in Old Calabar River. There was a dispute between the native inhabitants of the New and Old Towns at Calabar related to the supply of slaves. The captains of these vessels wrote to the chief of Old Town, Ephraim Robin John, inviting his party aboard, under their protection, to mediate in the dispute. The invitation was accepted and the chief's three brothers along with twenty-seven others in nine canoes went first aboard the *Indian Queen*. Next morning the brothers went aboard the *Edgar*, and afterwards the *Duke of York*, leaving their attendants moored alongside. The crew of the *Duke of York*, armed with pistols and cutlasses, rushed into the cabin, seized and wounded the brothers and put them in irons. They then fired on the canoe alongside and variously captured, killed or drowned its occupants. The other ships joined in and many more Africans were killed or drowned attempting to escape. The inhabitants of New Town, then emerged from hiding, manned their canoes and joined in the slaughter. The total number of Old Town inhabitants killed, captured or drowned was said to be three hundred.

The people of New Town demanded that the captain of the *Duke of York* surrender to them Amboe Robin John, the eldest of the three brothers. Despite his pleas for mercy he was exchanged for a slave and then beheaded in full view of everyone. The remaining two brothers were carried off in the *Duke of York* to be sold as slaves in the West Indies. The story had a profound effect on Clarkson; "...this tragical event now fully confirmed me in the sentiment that the hearts of those, who were concerned in this traffic, became unusually hardened, and that I might readily believe any atrocities, however great, which might be related of them."

It was only after this momentous meeting with Lace that Clarkson revealed he had been staying at the King's Arms and, up until then, more or less incognito. He gave no indication why he had not been given hospitality by his Liverpool hosts. Perhaps it was to enable him to come and go as he pleased; perhaps because he was accompanied by the surgeon Falconbridge. However, a profound change took place following his interviews with Norris and Lace.<sup>1</sup> "*The company at dinner had hitherto varied but little as to number, and consisted of those, both from the town and the country who had been accustomed to keep up a connection with the house.*" Thereafter the Inn began to be frequented by curious onlookers, and many began to engage him in conversation and dispute, including slave-captains and merchants. He attributed this to alarm being spread within the trade by Coupland, as a result of the dispute with him when interviewing Norris, and by Lace, "*as may be now easily imagined.*"<sup>1</sup>

However, Clarkson seems to have remained blissfully unaware, even twenty years after the event, of the close relationship that existed between his hosts, the Liverpool abolitionists, and Captain Ambrose Lace, to whom he has just expressed a good measure of his disgust concerning the trade and who he has intemperately accused of being concerned in the barbarous events at Old Calabar. Captain Lace, for all his apparent shock at these allegations, was unlikely to be as perturbed as depicted. He had long since been asked for testimony about these events and vigorously denied Captain Floyd's interpretation (Master of the Bristol vessel the

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*Indian Queen*), and his own role in them, stating that he had cleared Old Calabar in the *Edgar* before the *Indian Queen* and the *Duke of York*, and therefore knew nothing of the supposed events.<sup>18</sup> The fact that the *Edgar* was back in Liverpool in May of 1768 whilst the *Indian Queen* was still in the West Indies, where it arrived on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, is, at least, not inconsistent with this account.<sup>5</sup>

Nor was Clarkson aware that, far from being in the West India trade, Chaffers has been in the slave business for as long as Lace and was part owner with Lace of the *Edgar* at the time of Old Calabar, and had commanded the vessel on its previous voyage.<sup>5</sup> Captain Ambrose Lace was also the father of Joshua Lace, a prominent lawyer in the town, who was later a founder of the Liverpool Law Society. Roscoe can never have mentioned this to Clarkson, but Joshua Lace was his business partner in a very successful legal practice in the town – Aspinnall, Roscoe and Lace.<sup>18</sup>

Some five years later, in July of 1792 Roscoe, pursuing his botanical interests wrote a letter to William Lace, the brother of Joshua Lace, his legal partner, and son of Ambrose Lace. William Lace, master of the ship *Joshua*, had sailed for Angola on the May 11<sup>th</sup> and so Roscoe gave his letter to Captain Evans of the *Mary* which sailed on the July 14<sup>th</sup>. William Lace became something of an explorer and botanist and is said to have brought home the first account of the Gorilla and to have had a hand along with Roscoe in founding the Liverpool Botanic Gardens.<sup>15</sup> In his letter to William Lace, Roscoe asks him to collect seeds or bulbs of African or West Indian plants and offers to pay any costs attendant on collection. Roscoe tells him that growing plants should not be collected as they will be too difficult to preserve but that seeds and bulbs if kept dry should grow in a hot-house on his return. He also had some advice to offer about his primary responsibilities.

*“To have the unlimited direction and control of several hundreds of people who are to rely upon your care and management for their protection and support, places you in a situation of great responsibility, not only to your owners, but to the poor creatures committed to your charge, and to your own conscience. .... I need not, I am sure, remark that any warmth or hastiness of temper (which, if ever you had it, is, I think, now well corrected by experience) might be productive of consequences which you might ever have to repent. Coolness, vigilance, compassion, attention to the necessities of all under your charge are essential requisites. Let these never be forgotten, and let the poor imprisoned African find that in all his distresses he is not without a friend.”*

Perhaps Roscoe also omitted to mention that John Barton of the London Committee had privately written to him asking for a confidential report on Clarkson saying; *“His zeal and activity are wonderful but I am really afraid he will at times be deficient in caution and prudence, and lay himself open to imposition, as well as incur much expense, perhaps sometimes unnecessarily.”*<sup>3</sup>

## *An African Sailor and a Pettifogging Attorney.*

Meanwhile things continued ever more lively at the King’s Arms with more and more people coming to debate, taunt and offer extravagant and provocative toasts to the trade. Choosing to shun retreat Clarkson resolved to meet this head on with informed and resolute debate. The Kings Arms became a daily debating

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chamber with slave merchants and slave captains on the one side and Clarkson and Falconbridge on the other, Falconbridge acting as a foil to the charge that he was ignorant of the trade.<sup>1</sup>

*“Day after day we beat our opponents out of the field, as many of the company acknowledged, to their no small mortification, in their presence. Thus, while we served the cause by discovering all that could be said against it, we served it by giving numerous individuals proper ideas concerning it, and of interesting them in our favour.”*

The effect of this on his primary mission of gathering evidence and finding credible witnesses of some standing was disastrous. By turning his quiet sojourn at the King’s Arms into a daily debating society, no doubt with liquor flowing freely, was placing his potential supporters in a difficult and dangerous position.<sup>1</sup>

*“The second effect which I experienced was, that from this time I could never get anyone to come forward as an evidence to serve the cause. There were, I believe, hundreds of persons in Liverpool, and in the neighbourhood of it, who had been concerned in this traffic, and who had left it, all of whom could have given such testimony concerning it as would have insured its abolition. But none of them would now speak out.”*

Those who did support the cause would now only visit him in private because his *“...object was so unpopular, ... that they would have their houses pulled down, if they should then appear as public instruments in the annihilation of the trade, ...that these fears were not groundless, appeared afterwards; for Dr. Binns, ... to whom Isaac Hadwen had introduced me, was near falling into a mischievous plot, which had been laid against him, because he was one of the subscribers to the Institution for the Abolition of the Slave-trade, and because he was suspected of having aided me in promoting that object.”*

The nature of the plot against Jonathan Binns is uncertain, however his son wrote a manuscript about his life in which he gave this account.<sup>11</sup>

*“Previous to my father leaving Liverpool parties for and against the slave-trade ran very high and the merchants were greatly exasperated against the abolitionists and my father being one of the most zealous was marked for their enmity and in instance of which he was called up one night with a message to attend one of Robert Benson’s family and as the way was by the side of Salthouse dock, it was supposed, as it was found that no message had been sent from Robert Benson’s, that his destruction was intended, and suspecting the truth of the message did not go.”*

Whether this is an accurate account of the plot or not, it is remarkably similar to the fate almost meted out to Clarkson himself. However, Clarkson continued to meet with returning sailors, *“these were always forward to speak to me and tell me of their grievances”* and two or three came everyday to the King’s Arms. This inflamed the merchants who demanded his ejection from the hotel. Thereafter he took lodgings in Williamson Square, using it as a place to write, sometimes to sleep, but principally to receive informants from among the guinea sailors. From them Clarkson learned that men entered the trade either through ignorance of its nature and the extravagant promises held out to them, or by the use of indebtedness. There seemed to be no practice of signing concealed articles as at Bristol, but the effects of the trade on the health of the crews were just as conspicuous.<sup>1</sup>

## *Quayside Incident*

The loss of sailors by death was so similar to Bristol that it made no difference which port's statistics were used to make the calculation. However, because the Liverpool vessels sailed straight into the docks he "*saw at once their sickly and ulcerated crews. The number of vessels, too, was so much greater from this, than from any other port, that their sick made a more conspicuous figure in the infirmary. And they were seen also more frequently in the streets.*"

Of course very exact information about the numbers of seamen entering the Hospital could have been had from Dr James Currie. But again, as at Bristol, Clarkson was going around doing his own footwork, in the company of, not only a resolute Mr. Falconbridge, but an armed Mr. Falconbridge, with two loaded pistols concealed beneath his seaman's coat. That he should prefer this laborious method of discovering the trade's effect on the seamen's health when he had available to him introductions to three members of the Liverpool Hospital Board is a little curious. Having thus closed off for himself virtually all avenues of collecting the material evidence he required, and identifying witnesses capable of testifying before Parliament, he reverted once more to the investigation of individual cases of shipboard abuse.

The treatment of the sailors was, it seemed to Clarkson, "*but one barbarous system from the beginning to the end*" in which the men became gradually brutalized, as one voyage followed another, and they rose through the ranks, ultimately to command their own vessels. In Bristol he had heard of cruelty aboard the *Alfred* and he made use of this intelligence again in Liverpool.<sup>1</sup> He had heard, from an officer of the *Alfred*, that Peter Green, steward of a Liverpool ship the *Vulture*, had been murdered at Bonny River when the captain of the *Alfred* was on board. The *Vulture*, Captain James Brown, was owned by William Boats.<sup>5</sup> Clarkson discovered the vessel in the wet-dock and attempted to find out more from the sailors but received only guarded and non-committal replies.<sup>1</sup>

Clarkson examined the muster roll and found that 16 of the crew had died, among whom was Peter Green. The ship had left Liverpool on June 5th 1786, and returned on June 5th 1787. Peter Green died on September 19th; "*from which circumstances it was evident that he must... have died upon the Coast.*" There the matter remained until about ten days before he left Liverpool when he met George Ormond who came to his lodgings complaining of ill-usage.

Ormond had been aboard the same vessel and gave him a full account. Peter Green was accused of assault by a black female linguister named Rodney belonging to William Boats. Green had refused to give her the keys to the pantry because she had drunk the wine last time she borrowed them, for which Green received a flogging. A scuffle over the keys ensued. When Captain Brown, along with Captain Robe of the *Alfred* returned from shore, she accused Green of assault. The captain lashed him with both ends of the cat, using the knot about his head. When Green appealed to the mates both were ordered to flog him. By this time the cat was worn out but the Captain merely gave orders for a new one and the punishment continued for two and a half hours. Green was then bound and shackled and lowered into a boat lying alongside. During the night he was found to be dead. The next morning the Captain, showing no concern, ordered that his body be buried on Bonny Point.<sup>1</sup>

Clarkson told Ormond that his previous enquiries among the crew had found no corroboration of these events. Ormond became angry but Clarkson told him to

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stay cool and he would talk to him again. Meanwhile Clarkson verified Ormond's presence on the voyage from the muster roll as well as the presence of other sailors he had named. Next day Ormond appeared again in high spirits and said the sailor Clarkson had spoken to did acknowledge that the crime had taken place as he had related it. However, this man was going on another voyage in the same vessel with an offer of promotion to prevent him divulging the story. Clarkson hatched a scheme with Falconbridge to obtain confirmation of the story by a stratagem in which Ormond would talk to him in a tavern whilst Clarkson eavesdropped through a partition from atop a stool in an adjoining room. During the conversation between Ormond and his ship-mate, Ormond said, "Well then you believe Peter Green was actually murdered?" "If Peter Green was not murdered then no man ever was." was the overheard reply.<sup>1</sup>

Clarkson determined to bring the matter before the mayor, and have the ship's officers arrested, but before doing so he decided to consult his friends, presumably he meant his abolitionist hosts in Liverpool.<sup>1</sup>

*"But, in mentioning my intention to my friends, I was dissuaded from it. They had no doubt but that in Liverpool, as there was now a notion that the Slave-trade would become a subject of parliamentary inquiry, every effort would be made to overthrow me. They were of opinion also that such of the magistrates, as were interested in the trade, when applied to for warrants of apprehension, would contrive to give notice to the officers to escape. In addition to this they believed, that so many in the town were already incensed against me, that I should be torn to pieces; and the house where I lodged burnt down, if I were to make the attempt. I thought it right therefore to do nothing for the present; but I sent Ormond to London, to keep him out of the way of corruption, till I should make up my mind as to further proceedings on the subject."*

Clarkson omitted going into all the injustices to seamen he encountered in Liverpool for brevity and to spare his readers' feelings. He says they "*harassed my constitution and affected my spirits daily*" and he characterized those involved in the trade as "*abandoned wretches*" and "*a race of monsters.*" How very different from his initial assessment of Robert Norris!<sup>1</sup>

By now Clarkson was receiving threatening letters urging him to leave town if he wanted to leave alive. He could not leave his lodgings without the protection of Falconbridge and his brace of pistols. It was then that the Incident on the Quayside took place.<sup>1</sup> The incident could not itself have brought about the souring of relationships between Clarkson and the Liverpool abolitionists, but it sprang from the same well. If the Liverpool Abolitionists had, thought they could act as the information conduit to the London Committee and could set the agenda for Abolition, then events had moved decisively out of their control. To the Liverpool Abolitionists trying to cobble together a position in the centre of the storm, Falconbridge and Clarkson, must have borne a strong resemblance to a pair of loose shipboard cannon, prowling around the taverns of Liverpool, scrambling across the decks of the moored guineamen, and holding open and noisy debates in a hotel in the centre of town. They had put so many noses out of joint and trodden on so many toes and so poisoned the atmosphere that the Liverpool group's plans, whatever they may have been, were by now, they must have felt, lying in complete ruin. A noticeable feature of Clarkson's account was his emotional response to the

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enormities he was documenting “*I was in a state of trembling myself*” he declared as he recalled the crass attempts at gunboat diplomacy at Old Calabar and the connections he made between these crimes and the wanton cruelty of the slave ship captains.<sup>1</sup>

Had Clarkson fallen a victim of his own propaganda? Can it be that he believed that of all the men who failed to return from Africa, the majority died as a result of some drunken slave ship captain beating their brains out with a knotted rope? It hardly seems credible, when he must have known that the prime cause of mortality was tropical disease, coupled, one is forced to think, with the copious alcohol abuse that probably lead directly or indirectly to much of the remainder. Nevertheless his “campaign”, which veered this way in Bristol, had taken the same turn in Liverpool, away from the patient garnering of evidence for a parliamentary proceedings, to the pursuit of prosecutions against men in the trade. This was something that would not, and could not, be supported by his largely Quaker committee, and that could find no support among his Liverpool hosts, though fully in line with the approach of its chairman and his hero Granville Sharpe, famed for his prosecution of the Somerset case.

Following the incident on the pier head Clarkson left Liverpool, leaving Falconbridge behind, to visit Lancaster where his contact was another Quaker, William Jepson. The trip proved a complete waste of time for he learned that although there were slave merchants in the town<sup>1</sup> “*they made their outfits at Liverpool, as a more convenient port*”. “*There were only now one or two superannuated captains living in the place.*” The only item of any significance he could report was that “*the captain of the last vessel, that had sailed out of Lancaster to the coast of Africa for slaves, had taken off so many of the natives treacherously, that any other vessel known to come from it would be cut off.*”

Indeed the only outfit making voyages out of Lancaster was that of James Sawrey & Co who put together some 15 or so between 1781 and 1792.<sup>5,20</sup> Even these voyages frequently used Liverpool on their way out or on their return. The particular voyage mentioned may have been that of the *Molly*, Josiah Hort, which cleared Lancaster for Sierra Leone and Kingston, Jamaica in 1785 and returned in August 1786.<sup>5</sup> If so it might explain Currie’s later failure to substantiate some rumour concerning Hort’s behaviour aboard the *King Joe*, said to have been “*of a deeper dye than usual,*” if he had actually confused the vessel on which it occurred. Finally Clarkson examined the muster rolls in the Custom House, “*and having found that the loss of seamen was precisely in the same proportion as elsewhere, I gave myself no further trouble, but left the place.*”<sup>1</sup>

So Clarkson returned to Liverpool where he found Falconbridge had been contacted by a shipmate of Ormond’s, Patrick Murray, who was discharged in the West Indies but had since returned, not it seems from death, but simply from the West Indies, via the run. Finding the man able to confirm the allegations in every detail, Clarkson had Murray dispatched to London to join Ormond.

The hostility towards him had not abated and it was impossible to obtain any further evidence. Feeling he had everything he needed he decided to leave Liverpool. In particular he had the names of over 20,000 seamen whose fate he could account.<sup>1</sup>

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*"I learned also from Mr. Falconbridge, that my visitors had continued to come to the King's Arms during my absence; that they had been very liberal in their abuse of me; and that one of them did not hesitate to say (which is remarkable) that "I deserved to be thrown off the pier-head."*

And so Clarkson left Liverpool for Manchester where he caught up with the newspapers for the first time in weeks and became aware that the London Committee had not been idle. There was a growing grass roots movement and petitions to parliament were beginning to be raised. Here he met Thomas Walker, Manchester radical and correspondent of Charles James Fox. Items critical of the slave trade began to appear in the Manchester Herald in November 1787. The Manchester Committee to Abolish the Slave Trade was established at a public meeting on December 27<sup>th</sup> and a committee was elected that included Thomas Walker, chairman, and Thomas Percival. In Manchester he was invited to deliver a sermon highly critical of the trade taking as his text Exodus Chapter 23 verse 9.<sup>1</sup> *"Thou shalt not oppress a stranger for ye know the heart of a stranger since ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."* He held out the prospect of the judgment of Tyre and Sidon, from the book of Joel chapter 3 verses 3 and 4, which he named as the Bristol and Liverpool of Biblical times. *"And what have ye to do with me O Tyre and Sidon, and all the coasts of Palestine ? Ye have cast lots for my people. Ye have sold a girl for wine. The children of Judah, and the children of Jerusalem have ye sold unto the Grecians, that ye might remove them far from their own border. Behold! I will raise them out of the place whither ye have sold them, and will recompense your wickedness on your own heads."*

From Manchester Clarkson traveled to Keddleston, in Derbyshire and to Birmingham and finally back once again to Bristol where he found that he had been sought by letter and advertisement for the trial over the murder of William Lines due to be heard at the Old Bailey. He learned from Lines' mother that four witnesses had been bribed to sea by the merchants but two more had taken employment in the coal mines of Neath. Clarkson pursued these witnesses across the Severn in a rough sea, located them, and had them dispatched to London where found the charge against the mate already been dismissed for want of evidence.<sup>1</sup> *"Such was the end of all my anxiety and labour in this affair."*

Clarkson returned to London in November of 1787 determined to pursue the matter of the murder of Peter Green.<sup>1</sup> He took his witnesses, George Ormond and Patrick Murray, before Sir Sampson Wright, successor to Henry Fielding at the Bow Street Office, who cross-examined them, and had depositions drawn up. Wright thought that the evidence of his sufferings and the nature of his wounds could not be overturned by any evidence that he had been subject to other disorders which might have caused his death. He applied to the Liverpool magistrates for the apprehension of the principal officers of the ship but was told that the ship had sailed, and none of them were to be found. Clarkson had now to consider whether he would keep Ormond and Murray, for upwards of a year at his own expense. Not only that but he had *"no less than nine prosecutions at law upon my hands ... and nineteen witnesses detained at my own cost. The committee in London could give me no assistance in these cases."*

Reluctantly he gave in and sent the witnesses back to Liverpool. He then tried to bring a prosecution against the Captain for his treatment of the sailors but,

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according to Clarkson, his attorney privately settled with Ormond and Murray agreeing to pay damages for their injuries. In return the witnesses bound themselves not to support any action against the captain. And so after all these prosecutions had run into the sand, much as he had been warned they would by Burges, the Bristol attorney, and no doubt also by Roscoe, the Liverpool attorney, Clarkson retired to the country to begin writing A pamphlet containing his most recent findings on the nature of the slave-trade – *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade*.<sup>21</sup> And, despite the ferment and bitterness that Clarkson's visit had provoked in Liverpool, Currie and Roscoe did not sit idly by, or retreat into silent and sulky anonymity, but continued to pursue their objectives for abolition in ways that seemed to them likely to be the most productive.