



- William Wilberforce is best known as a politician, whose conversion to Evangelical Christianity in 1785 resulted in major changes to his 'rowdy' lifestyle, and he became more focused social reform issues, like eradicating the slave trade and improving work environments in factories.
- He was also well known for being a great, witty conversationalist, and having a powerful and eloquent speaking voice.

Early Life—Wealth and Wild Times at Cambridge, work as an MP

- William Wilberforce was born on August 24th, 1759 in Hull, England, the son of a wealthy merchant.
- Studied at Cambridge University, where he developed a close relationship with England's future Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger.
 - Interesting fact: Wilberforce's friend William Pitt the Younger was the youngest Prime Minister in Great Britain's history at age 24. He was elected to the position in 1783!
- Wilberforce began studying at Cambridge at age 17 in 1776. The deaths of his grandfather and uncle left him with a large inheritance, and due in part to this wealth Wilberforce focused more on 'partying' than studying. Some of his favourite activities were playing cards and gambling, and drinking late into the night with his friends at school.
 - Those who knew Wilberforce remarked at how witty, generous, and excellent a conversationalist he was. As you can imagine, he was a very popular figure at Cambridge!
- While completing university, Wilberforce began to consider a political career, and in 1780, at age 21 and while still a student, Wilberforce was elected to the British Parliament. Because he was rich, he was able to use money to 'influence' his way to victory and sit as an Independent MP.
 - Wilberforce continued frequenting gambling clubs and loved to converse at pubs and sing. Madame de Staël, a famous socialite at the time, called Wilberforce "the wittiest man in England."

Wilberforce's Conversion

- In 1784 Wilberforce went on a tour of Europe, which had a profound impact on him, and ultimately resulted in his conversion to Evangelical Christianity. During this tour, Wilberforce's lifestyle began to change.
 - Instead of drinking, gambling, and partying, at this time Wilberforce began waking up early to read the Bible and to pray. He kept a personal journal about his changing beliefs.
 - At some point during the trip Wilberforce underwent an evangelical conversion, and he began regretting the way he spent his past life. He resolved to dedicate his future life and work to the service of God.
 - Conversion may have changed Wilberforce's habits, but to others, he remained witty, cheerful and respectful.

- Inwardly, however, Wilberforce became very self-critical, and would always second-guess his use of time, self-control, and relationships with others. He always felt as if he was selfish, and wasn't doing enough to serve God,

Wilberforce and abolishing the slave trade

- In 1783, about 80% of England's income came from the slave trade. The British would sell their goods to slave traders in Africa for slaves. The slaves would then be sent to the Caribbean to work on plantations that grew sugar, tobacco, and cotton, which would then be shipped back to England to be manufactured and sold around the world, and back to slave traders.
 - It is estimated that 11 million Africans were transported into slavery, and about 1.4 million died due to horrific conditions on the vessels carrying them.
- Wilberforce was persuaded by Thomas Clarkson, a prominent slavery abolitionist to lobby for the abolition of the slave trade.
- For 18 years, Wilberforce regularly introduced anti-slavery motions in parliament.
- The campaign was supported by many members of the Clapham Sect and other abolitionists who raised public awareness of their cause with pamphlets, books, rallies and petitions.
- In 1807, the slave trade was finally abolished, but this did not free those who were already slaves. It was not until 1833 that an act was passed giving freedom to all slaves in the British empire.

Later Life and Death

- Wilberforce's other efforts to 'renew society' included the Association for the Better Observance of Sunday, whose goal was to provide all children with regular education in reading, personal hygiene and religion.
- He was closely involved with the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.
- He was also instrumental in encouraging Christian missionaries to go to India.
- Wilberforce retired from politics in 1825 and died on 29 July 1833, shortly after the act to free slaves in the British Empire passed through the House of Commons. He was buried near his friend Pitt in Westminster Abbey.

Famous Quotes

- "So enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did the [slave] trade's wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for abolition. Let the consequences be what they would: I from this time determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition."
- "If to be feelingly alive to the sufferings of my fellow-creatures is to be a fanatic, I am one of the most incurable fanatics ever permitted to be at large."
- "To live our lives and miss that great purpose we were designed to accomplish is truly a sin. It is inconceivable that we could be bored in a world with so much wrong to tackle, so much ignorance to reach and so much misery we could alleviate."