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William Ward (Photo: Derby LS Library)

William played his part
Meet William Ward, a Derby newspaper editor who used his position to highlight the injustice and cruelty behind the slave trade during the years leading up to abolition.

William Ward became editor of the Derby Mercury at 19. He was a short young man, with hazel eyes and many of his contemporaries thought he would go far.

Naturally intelligent, hard working, and with a natural ability to get on with people, he quickly learned the political pre-occupations of the prominent dissenting community of which his employer, John Drewry, was a part.

With his youthful enthusiasm, he made them his own, and used his new position to do something.

The Mercury was unlike any newspaper we are used to today. Like most provincial papers it was a weekly digest of the London papers, and carried hardly any local news. It employed just 3 or 4 people.

The Mercury could be bought all over Derbyshire, and 20 other towns and cities, including four shops and a coffee house in London.

The literacy rate was much higher than we might think, even amongst poorer people, and copies would change hands many, many times.

After extracting stories from Britain and around the world, he was free to include considerable amounts of other material.

The first articles on the Abolition of the Slave Trade started appearing in October, 1787.

At an early stage he was visited, in Derby, by Thomas Clarkson, who was travelling the country to promote the Abolition of the Slave Trade.

"After the interview, Mr Ward became one of the most earnest

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advocates of abolition, and improved every opportunity to hold up the atrocities of the trade to public detestation.

"Extracts were published from the evidence, week after week, accompanied by his own remarks, till a large number of his subscribers informed him that they could no longer endure this weekly exhibition of horrors, and must give up the journal unless he discontinued it." (John Clark Marshman, 1859)

Some of the stories are so gruesome it is difficult to repeat them, but his views can be judged by the following extract from 1st September, 1791:

'An African slave-ship was lately lost on the middle passage; - the account adds, "that the Men were saved but the ship and cargo lost" - Lest the reader should mistake the nature of this cargo, he is informed, that it consisted of TWO HUNDRED AND THIRTY of our fellow creatures - found guilty of having been born on the coast of Guinea, of black parents.'

On 13th March 1792 a meeting was held at County Hall, to petition parliament for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, with the support of Dr. Erasmus Darwin, the Strutt family, and the Evans family.

The petition attracted 3,669 signatures. A considerable achievement considering the population of Derby was just over 8,000.

On 3rd April, 1792, Wilberforce's bill was lost in the Commons by 145 votes. It could not be re-submitted for 7 years, so the campaign went on in other ways.

There were regular reports on the new Sierra Leone Company, which transported freed slaves from Canada back to Africa, to grow sugar as free men.

A sugar industry was started in India. It was also suggested that the maple, which grew wild in north America, could eventually replace West Indian sugar completely.

In late 1794 the Mercury's owner John Drewry died. The ownership and editor's job passed to his nephew John Drewry II.

The same editorial policy continued. Ward had filled the Mercury's pages with approximately 98,800 words on the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the circulation had increased to 1,500, but abolition was still no closer.

He went on to other things. With the war against France it was a dangerous time for reformers, even in Derby.

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