

CELEBRATING THE LIFE AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF THOMAS FOWELL BUXTON

A paper by the Thomas Fowell Buxton Society

Introduction - a Forgotten Hero



Thomas Fowell Buxton (1786 – 1845)

The culture of any Nation or region depends on the history of the people who lived there and their achievements. It has been well said that those ‘who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it’¹. And the achievements of great men and women, including an understanding of the struggles, the setbacks that they had to endure, can inspire today’s youth to make their own lives sublime².

The Thomas Fowell Buxton Society was formed in 2010 by people in Weymouth. The objective of the Society is to educate the general public as to the considerable achievements of one of Weymouth’s most illustrious MPs, Thomas Fowell Buxton. The primary aim of the Society is for a monument to be erected in Weymouth in 2012/2013. There are several complementary projects also planned.

The idea of a monument resonated immediately with members of the Weymouth and Portland Borough Council who indicated their strong support. The Honorary President of the society is the serving mayor, Graham Winter. The TV Chef Ainsley Harriott agreed to be Patron of the Society. Presentations to 31 citizen’s groups in the Weymouth area have also tapped a well-spring of public interest in Thomas Fowell Buxton and slavery. Everybody is agreed that this is an opportune time to create a memorial to Buxton’s memory as part of Weymouth’s cultural heritage.

The Society was granted small charity status in December 2011, backdated to November 4th, 2011.

In addition planning permission has been granted for the erection of a monument on Manor Roundabout; a gateway to Weymouth.

Thomas Fowell Buxton

Buxton was MP between 1818 and 1837 and was a leading campaigner for the abolition of slavery as an economic system.

He owned Belfield House in Wyke Regis. His younger brother Charles and also his Uncle Charles are buried at All Saints, Wyke Regis, Weymouth.

¹ George Santayana

² Henry Wadsworth Longfellow ‘A Psalm of Life’ 1838

Earlier campaigners, Granville Sharp, William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson had persuaded Parliament to abolish the trade in slaves in 1807. But slavery still persisted as an institution. Children continued to be born into slavery on plantations in the British Empire.

Thomas Fowell Buxton took over the leadership of the movement in parliament from William Wilberforce in 1821. In 1833 after a long campaign in which he was subjected to virulence, lampooning and attempts at character assassination, he succeeded in having Parliament pass an Act for the liberation of slaves. All slaves became free from midnight on 1st August 1834. On that day, 800,000 slaves ceased to be property, bought and sold at market like cattle, subject to arbitrary and often very cruel punishments, and with no standing in law. They became citizens, able to own property, maintain their marriages and families and their children became their own.³

In spite of many people's fears, the liberation passed off peacefully. There was no revenge, and neither did the erstwhile owners misbehave. Buxton and his colleagues had achieved the liberation by parliamentary process – something that could only be achieved in the USA by a great civil war.

Other achievements in Thomas Fowell Buxton's life include his work on criminal law reform reducing 230 capital offences to 8, and prison reform (in association with his sister-in-law) Elizabeth Fry. He worked to ameliorate the on-board conditions of prisoners being transported to Australia. In addition, as a brewer, he also arranged for the education of those he employed.

Lauded in the latter part of his life and created a Baronet in 1840, Buxton died in 1845 and has a memorial in Westminster Abbey, close to that of Wilberforce. But Buxton had been almost forgotten in Weymouth today. The only memorial to his family was the name *Buxton Road* in Wyke Regis. The celebrations of 2007 commemorated the abolition of the slave trade. No mention was made of the later achievement of the abolition of slavery itself. Indeed the general public may well have assumed that the 1807 date was the only one that mattered.

The Thomas Fowell Buxton Society

With so much goodwill being generated in Weymouth, and institutions anxious to help, it was necessary to form a society to act as a public voice in these activities. To provide the voluntary help in organising the various activities, and also raise the funds that would be needed to erect the monument and support other important educational projects. The Thomas Fowell Buxton Society was formed in August 2010 and has agreed the following object, in line with the requirements of the Charity Commissioners and HMRC:

Object: To advance the education of the public in general on the subject of the achievements of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton (philanthropist and MP for Weymouth and Melcombe Regis 1818-37) and in particular his achievement of the abolition of Slavery throughout the British Empire by Act of Parliament in 1833.

To achieve this object, the Society has agreed the following powers:

³ "Thomas Fowell Buxton and the Liberation of Slaves" Oliver Barclay, Wm Sessions, York 2001

- (a) to make the general public aware of the achievements of Thomas Fowell Buxton as described above. The whole scheme is seen as an educational project;
- b) to raise funds for a suitable monument which would be a permanent reminder of Weymouth's heritage; to the citizens of Weymouth, tourists and local schoolchildren (c) to organise the procurement of the monument and to negotiate with Weymouth and Portland Borough Council and Dorset Highways Department for having it positioned in a prominent place in Weymouth;
- (d) to organise a continuing programme of events, presentations and educational initiatives to ensure that the achievements of Thomas Fowell Buxton continue to be remembered.
- (e) in pursuance of the above aims, to work with local bodies
- (f) to work also with national organisations promoting racial equality and which share the philanthropic outlook characterised by Thomas Fowell Buxton.

The Society has drawn up a constitution and early work was carried out by an action group of 5 people. The Society held its inaugural public meeting on 16th February, 2011. Eight people have volunteered to serve on the committee. The society has built a website <http://www.thomasfowellbuxton.org.uk> which has registered over 1, 600 hits, and also publishes a newsletter. (Both constitution and examples of the Newsletter are available from the website).

The Mayor of Weymouth for 2010-11, Cllr Paul Kimber became the first Honorary President of the Society and his successors in the Mayoralty will likewise assume this position. Cllr Graham Winter, who succeeded Cllr Kimber as Mayor was made Honorary President in June 2011.

Ainsley Harriott, who traced his ancestry⁴ to a Negro slave and also to her white plantation owner in the West Indies, has agreed to become a Patron of the Society. His message to the Thomas Fowell Buxton society is "keep up the brilliant work; we all need to know. Thank you for bringing important history to people's attention".

Modern Day Slavery

Thomas Fowell Buxton would be disheartened today to see that although institutional slavery has disappeared in our culture, it has metastasised into other covert virulent forms: sex slavery and economic slavery. The Thomas Fowell Buxton Society's constitution covers the support of other organisations devoted to the publicising and eradication of these new forms. This will be primarily achieved by links from our website and working on projects which are of mutual benefit, such as education. To date local Fairtrade Campaign, the Multicultural Society and Purple Teardrop Campaign have all seen the relevance of our work to theirs.

Plans for a Monument

Weymouth College Masonry Department (Dorset Skills Centre at Poundbury) volunteered to have their students design and build a monument from Portland Stone as the memorial to him. The student design was chosen in May, 2011. The monument is being built currently by the students. Dorset Highways Department are also supportive and have suggested a site for

⁴ The BBC series "Who do you think you are?"

the monument at Manor Roundabout, at the end of the new relief road, and at the entrance to Weymouth. The monument will be seen by all visitors to Weymouth. The Society was pleased at the granting of planning permission in February, 2012. The monument is being carved with stone supplied by Albion Stone⁵, Portland.

Other Initiatives

While the monument project remains rightly the prime focus of the activities of the Thomas Fowell Buxton society in the coming months, it is necessary to complement this with supporting activities. Examples of these could be:

- A portrait could be commissioned, to hang in the local library or museum. There are enough portraits of Thomas Fowell Buxton in the National Portrait Gallery collection for a competent artist to produce a new representation.
- A Memorial Service on the day of commissioning. It would be appropriate if this were held at All Saints Church Wyke Regis, where Thomas Fowell Buxton's family worshipped. Thomas Fowell Buxton's deep Christian commitment could involve local church choirs and the Salvation Army Band in some form.
- Weymouth is a seaside resort and its population doubles in summer. So a tourist booklet will be produced, to give more details of Thomas Fowell Buxton's life and work. There will also be references to modern day slavery.
- Presentations to schools might be further developed with local schools being put in touch with similar ones in the Caribbean for cultural exchanges. There could be further humanities projects on this basis.
- Thomas Fowell Buxton's interest in prison reform might lead to local Art/Literature exhibitions of local prisoners' work. There are two prisons in the area, the Verne, Portland, and Dorchester Prison.
- Local Weymouth choirs (for example the Quangle Wangle Choir) might like to put together programmes of Caribbean music and Negro Spirituals for performance.
- A Caribbean Market with Steel Bands might be another possible project.

Our Project - a 'Grass roots movement'

The Thomas Fowell Buxton Project involves Culture, Education and Volunteering.

Culture: As described above the celebration of the achievements of Thomas Fowell Buxton will do much to improve people's consciousness of the part he played in one of the most noble and altruistic enterprises in British History. The projects envisaged cover Art, Music and History as well as multicultural activities.

Education: The Society is continuing to offer presentations to local organisations and schools on "Thomas Fowell Buxton and Slavery". Already this initiative has resulted in thirty one presentations. An educational project for Weymouth and Portland Schools is being planned, with a pilot scheme having been being delivered to Year 6 at St Augustine's Primary School, Weymouth. Presentations to Secondary Schools will include 21st century initiatives

⁵ <http://www.albionstone.com>

such as Fairtrade⁶ and Purple Teardrop⁷ to alert students that slavery is still prevalent in the world, with people trafficking and economic servitude.

Volunteering: The plans for a Thomas Fowell Buxton Monument have excited the imaginations of students at the Weymouth College Dorset Skills Centre. The initiative to form and run the Thomas Fowell Buxton Society itself arises from volunteer effort from the community. All the society initiatives, both cultural and educational activities will be carried out by mainly by volunteers. The community is already very much involved in fundraising.

The project can fairly be described as a ‘Community Project’, being conceived, planned, and managed by the local community. It will be brought to fruition by the local community.

Conclusions

Commemorating the life’s work of a man whose actions brought about the end of the institution of slavery most assuredly celebrates a hugely significant achievement in terms of human endeavour and particularly in the recognition of the value of human freedom, opportunities and fundamental rights.

Thomas Fowell Buxton took over the work begun by his friend William Wilberforce, building upon the legal abolition of the slave trade and bringing about the end of the actual practice of slavery. This was achieved in the face of significant hostility and not without huge opposition from those who benefited by the use of slave labour.

Buxton once memorably said:

“the longer I live the more I am certain that the great difference between the great and the insignificant is energy – invincible determination – a purpose once fixed and then death or victory”

As MP for Weymouth, it is fitting that his memory is being celebrated at a time when this area becomes involved in the 2012 Olympiad. The attention of the world will centre upon the sailing events in South Dorset, taking place with the physical background of the Jurassic World Heritage Coast. It reminds us that the values expressed and exemplified by the life of Thomas Fowell Buxton, and what he achieved, are not only of local significance, or even national, but of international significance.

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Committee

John Fannon
Henry Brackenbury
Joyce Fannon.
Marilyn Brackenbury
Cllr Bill White
Cllr David Mannings
Cllr Trefor Morgan
Elsa Fenton

⁶ <http://www.fairtrade.org.uk>

⁷ <http://www.purpleteardrop.org.uk>