

## A Letter from a Schoolboy

‘Here he comes!’ cried the excited crowd.

Everybody strained to catch a glimpse of their thin, bearded King as he rode his large horse down the main street of Hull.

‘He’s smaller than I thought,’ a lady commented to a friend as he passed.

‘Not so small that he can’t raise a huge army,’ said another, ‘and my husband will be called up to serve in it, I warrant!’

The retinue of accompanying horsemen reined in at a large, red bricked house on the main street. No. 27, belonged to the Lord Mayor, Sir John Lister, who stood waiting for King Charles II at the gate.

‘Welcome to Hull, your Majesty. And welcome to our home.’

‘It’s a pleasure to be here, Sir John,’ came the reply, ‘and what a fine house you have here.’

King Charles spent the night at the Lister home, and ate in a banqueting room with oak-panelled walls bearing the Lister coat-of-arms above the fireplace.

In this famous house, now open to the public, William Wilberforce was born. The back garden ran to a steep bank of the River Hull, and at high tide William would watch ships sail up and down.

At low tide, barges were pulled or punted from one large

warehouse to another. Hull was the fourth port of England after London, Bristol and Liverpool.

‘I wonder what St Petersburg is like?’ William thought one day as he watched a Russian ship go past the family garden, the name of its port written clearly on its bow. Another day a ship from Sweden came past, heavily laden with iron ore. ‘I’d love to go to Sweden,’ thought William.

Many a time he would stand and watch the ships being loaded with everything from ponies brought in from all over the countryside to knives from Sheffield.

‘Oh! I’d love to be a sea captain,’ thought William, ‘and then I could explore the countries of the world!’

His grandfather, who had been Mayor of Hull, had become a very rich merchant through owning ships and trading with the Baltic. William’s father, Robert, became a managing partner in William’s grandfather’s business and he also became a very wealthy and successful merchant.

God had great plans for Robert’s little boy but his becoming a sea captain was not one of them.

One day William, now seven years of age, came charging through the front door of his home, through the large hall, tiled with black and white squares like a great giant chess board, and up the main wide staircase to his sister, Sarah’s room.

‘Sarah! Sarah,’ he cried, bursting into the room.

Sarah looked across to her fair-haired brother who stood before her in his full skirted coat, knee-breeches, white stockings and buckled shoes.

‘Sarah, you’ll never guess. Mr. Milner, our teacher, swung me onto the table in front of the whole class today. He made me read from the book, *Robinson Crusoe* for about five minutes.

“There,” cried Mr. Milner, pointing with one of his hands to me and with his other to my class, “That’s how you all should read!”

‘But you do have a lovely voice!’ replied Sarah, at which her brother burst out laughing.

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She was, of course, absolutely right. William’s voice was to become one of his most famous qualities. One day he would become one of the greatest speakers in history and be named, ‘The Nightingale of the House of Commons’. The house on High Street was often to ring with the lively cries of Robert and Elizabeth Wilberforce’s son, for he was a little bundle of energy as well as having a very bright mind.

Sadly, though, little William’s life was soon to be filled with sorrow.

Running upstairs one day, just home from the Grammar School of Kingston-upon-Hull, his mother Elizabeth came out of her bedroom looking very sad.

‘William, you must not make a noise,’ she said, closing the door gently behind her, ‘Your father has taken very ill.’

William stopped in his tracks, feeling numb.

‘How ill, Mother?’ he asked.

‘You can come in to see him, but you must be very, very quiet,’ said his mother gently.

William would never forget his father lying in that room so very ill.

‘You must be good to your mother and Sarah,’ he kept saying.

William failed to recognise that death was not far away.

When his father died there was no sadder boy in all of Hull than William Wilberforce. He stood by his father's grave side, a heartbroken lad of nine amongst the mourners.

'God bless you son!' the various merchant-friends of his father's said to him as they shook his hand. They all wondered what would become of him.

His Uncle William came up to the young boy's mother.

'You must let him come and stay with us in Surrey, Elizabeth,' he said gently.

William's mother wiped a tear stained eye.

'You know that my wife Hannah and I have no children of our own. We will be more than happy to have young William here with us at Wimbledon. He is a delightful child, and besides, it will bring relief to you at this very difficult time.'

'It's very good of you, William,' replied Mrs. Wilberforce, 'I'll bring him to you next year. It won't be easy for him to leave Hull, but it will be for the best.'

'There will be plenty for him to do,' assured William's uncle. 'We'll send him to school at Putney and he can also come and stay at our London home at St James' Place.'

One year after his father's death, a carriage pulled up at No. 27. The various servants stood at the gate as the coachman began to load up the luggage. Lots of tears were shed and William received many hugs and kisses.

'We'll miss you lad,' said the cook who had fed William so often when he would sneak into the kitchen, ravenous for food! She didn't know what she was going to do without him. Sarah, perhaps, was the most heartbroken of all.

'Write soon, William,' she said through her tears, 'Tell me all about London.'

‘I will,’ he replied ‘and will you please write to me and tell me what’s happening at home?’

‘I promise,’ said Sarah as William and his mother were helped by the footman into the carriage.

‘Forward!’ cried the coachman as the horses started over the cobbled stones and William Wilberforce started out on the first of many long journeys in his life from Yorkshire to London.

The distance to London was 175 miles and the coach could only cover 30 per day. William and his mother had to stay at various inns on their journey.

‘What’s the coachman carrying pistols for, Mother?’ asked William when they got out at the first inn.

‘I’m sorry I have to tell you,’ replied the lady, ‘but there are many dangerous highwaymen about who hold up coaches and rob travellers!’

‘Will we be robbed?’ asked William.

‘Please God, we won’t,’ said his mother trying to reassure her boy whose eyes were now filled with fear.

Their journey went well, and William was fascinated by all the different scenes that passed before his eyes.

As they travelled across the rolling English countryside passing towns and villages, he began to wonder what on earth London would look like.

Soon they arrived in Nottingham and immediately William was on the lookout for Robin Hood and his Merry Men.

‘Do you think we’ll see any of them?’ he asked, enthusiastically.

‘I’m afraid not,’ replied Mrs. Wilberforce, ‘They have long since died. Though, what fun we had, reading all those stories about them, didn’t we? I think you liked Maid Marion best!’

Soon the coach began to near the great city of London. At an inn, one evening, as they were eating their meal, a nearby traveller began to tell the story of what had happened the night before.

‘Ah! It was a very grizzly affair, Ma’am. The stagecoach was passing through Epping Forest when it was attacked by no less than seven highwaymen.’

‘Seven!’ cried William, ‘They must have been determined to rob the travellers.’

‘They certainly were lad,’ replied the traveller, ‘but the guard was very brave. He killed three of them before he was killed himself.’

No-one was happier to get safely to London than William.

At last the coach brought them to Wimbledon and his uncle and aunt. After a short stay, his mother returned to Yorkshire and left William to settle into his new surroundings. He later described his school as ‘a most wretched little place’ where ‘they taught everything and nothing.’ He particularly detested the school dinners and when he grew older he stated he could remember ‘meals which I could not eat without sickness’.

The one great thing in William’s life, though, was his love for his uncle and aunt.

He had not lived with them for very long before he discovered that they both had a deep love for the Lord Jesus and were very enthusiastic Christians.

They were friends with one of the best known Christians in England, the Reverend George Whitfield. Although William did not realise it at the time, Whitfield was to go down in history as one of the greatest preachers in the history of the Christian church.

Whitfield had a great friend called John Wesley who was to become the founder of the Methodist Church. Wesley was as famous as Whitfield, and Hannah, William's aunt, came to know the Lord Jesus as her Saviour through his preaching. William was often taken along to church services.

'Who is that little boy who sings with such a beautiful voice?' people began to say. They could not help but notice the little boy's voice which soared above the singing of the congregation at services he attended.

John Wesley's brother, Charles, had written hundreds of new hymns, and William soon got to know and love some of these songs of praise.

There was one minister, though, who probably deeply influenced the little boy more than all the others.

This minister had once been a captain of a ship bringing slaves from Africa to the West Indies and had been converted to Christ in the middle of a thunderstorm in the Atlantic Ocean. Now he was a Church of England minister at Olney in Buckinghamshire. William thought the world of John Newton and loved his stories and his sermons.

John Newton was a man who was full of fun and had a very affectionate nature, and as a child, William treated him almost as his father. Little was the ex-sea captain and slave trader to realise the influence that his sermons were soon to have upon the boy and the world of slavery.

When William's mother heard of his interest in what he was hearing at the church services he attended, she was determined to put a stop to it all.

Although she went to church herself she was against anybody showing great 'enthusiasm'. She brought William home to Hull to get him away from the spiritual influences that were shaping his mind and heart.

## *The Freedom Fighter*

William later wrote, 'Being removed from my uncle and aunt affected me most seriously. It almost broke my heart, I was so much attached to them.'

The headmaster of William's old school had also turned with enthusiasm to the Gospel, so Elizabeth sent William to a school in a town called Polkington, thirteen miles from Hull.

If you visit the Holy Trinity Parish Church in Kingston-upon-Hull, you will find, above the entry to the tower stairs, in the north east pier, a marble monument to the Reverend Joseph Milner, who was, for thirty years, headmaster of the Grammar School and a leader of the Evangelical Revival. William was later to become a very prominent leader himself in this Revival, though his mother would never have dreamed it could have happened.

William lived in the house of his new headmaster and soon became a very popular boy in the school.

He had a great gift for mimicry and would "take off" the voices and mannerisms of his teachers. His friends would urge him to mimic their teachers and they fell about with laughter whenever he did.

He was very fond of poetry and used to learn it just for fun. When he went for a walk he usually carried a book of poetry in his pocket!

One day, when William was fourteen years old, he handed a letter to a friend of his called Walmsley.

'Please would you post this for me on your way home?' asked William.

Walmsley many years later, recalled how he saw that the envelope was addressed to the Editor of a Yorkshire newspaper and he was very curious.

'What on earth is the letter about?' he asked.



‘It’s a protest against what I have called, “The Odious Traffic in Human Flesh,” answered William enthusiastically.

‘And what, may I ask, is “The Odious Traffic in Human Flesh”?’ enquired a very surprised Walmsley.

‘You’ll see, if the Editor publishes it,’ said William with a smile.

Soon millions were to see what lay in the heart of the lad from Hull.