

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02505-8 - The Life of William Wilberforce, Volume 1

Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE
LIFE OF WILBERFORCE.

CHAPTER I.

Birth—Parentage—Education.

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE, only son of Robert Wilberforce and his wife Elizabeth, daughter of Thomas Bird Esq. of Barton, Oxon, was born at Hull upon the feast of St. Bartholomew, August 24, A. D. 1759. He was the third of four children, but of his three sisters the second only arrived at maturity.

His ancestors had long been settled in the county of York. In the reign of the second Henry, Ilgerus de Wilberfoss served in the Scottish wars under Philip de Kyme, with a daughter of whose powerful house he had intermarried. The township of Wilberfoss, eight miles east of York, gave him a mansion and a name; and his property extended to the neighbourhood of Stamford bridge, a spot then famous for the recent battle between Harold and Tosti, the last victory of the last Saxon monarch.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02505-8 - The Life of William Wilberforce, Volume 1

Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

At Wilberfoss the family was fixed for many generations, until, after a gradual decline in wealth and numbers, it disappeared from the place about a century ago.—“ Note, that all these,” says Robert Glover, Somerset Herald, after enumerating sixteen descents, “ did successively succeed as is here set down, and that they did successively occupy the Soake of Cotton which containeth six villages, &c.”¹ About the middle of the sixteenth century, the son of William Wilberfoss of Wilberfoss, by his second marriage, settled in the neighbouring town of Beverley. His son appears in the Visitation of 1612 as William Wilberfoss of Brigham: and here and at Beverley the younger branch rose into importance as the parent stock decayed.

William Wilberfoss was mayor of Beverley at the opening of the great rebellion; and the same office was twice filled at Hull, in the succeeding century, by a great-grandson William Wilberfoss, or, as he finally fixed its spelling, Wilberforce; who continued in the Baltic trade, though, besides his patrimonial fortune, he inherited a considerable landed property from his mother, an heiress of the Davye family. He was a man of much repute for talent and integrity; and the settlement of Joseph Milner in the grammar school at Hull is an abiding record of his well-directed influence. Robert, the younger of his two children, father of William Wilberforce, was a partner in the house at Hull; and here was spent the early childhood

¹ Herald's Vis. A. D. 1584.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02505-8 - The Life of William Wilberforce, Volume 1

Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

HIS CHILDHOOD.

3

of his distinguished son. The old man had seen much of life ; and one of those tales of travel with which he charmed his grandson is even yet preserved. He had been admitted to the intimacy of the Duke of Marlborough, then commanding the allied armies on the continent ; and was invited by that general to witness from the safeguard of a neighbouring eminence the incidents of an approaching battle. Through reluctance to overstep from idle curiosity the strict line of professional duty, enforced perhaps by a careful regard to his personal safety, the offer was prudently declined by the grateful merchant. Upon a more fitting occasion he displayed some military ardour when the arsenal of Hull was prepared for an expected attack in the year 1745.

Of the early years of William Wilberforce little is recorded. His frame from infancy was feeble, his stature small, his eyes weak, . . . a failing which with many rich mental endowments he inherited from his mother. It was one amongst the many expressions of his gratitude in after-life "that I was not born in less civilized times, when it would have been thought impossible to rear so delicate a child." But with these bodily infirmities were united a vigorous mind, and a temper eminently affectionate. An unusual thoughtfulness for others marked his youngest childhood: "I shall never forget," says a frequent guest at his mother's, "how he would steal into my sick room, taking off his shoes lest he should disturb me, and with an anxious face looking through my curtains to

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02505-8 - The Life of William Wilberforce, Volume 1

Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

learn if I was better." At seven years old he was sent to the grammar school of Hull, of which Joseph Milner was soon afterwards master. "Even then his elocution was so remarkable," says the younger Milner² at that time his brother's assistant, "that we used to set him upon a table, and make him read aloud as an example to the other boys." Thus he spent two years, going daily from his father's house to school with his "satchel on his shoulder," and occasionally visiting his grandfather at Ferriby, a pleasant village seven miles distant, on the Humber. The death of his father in the summer of 1768 transferred him to the care of his uncle William Wilberforce; and after a week's residence at Nottingham,³ he was sent to live with him at Wimbledon and in St. James's Place. Such was then the standard measure of private education, that the school at which he was soon afterwards placed was of the meanest character. "Mr. Chalmers the master, himself a Scotchman, had an usher of the same nation, whose red beard—for he scarcely shaved once a month—I shall never forget. They taught writing, French, arithmetic, and Latin. with Greek we did not much meddle. It was frequented chiefly by the sons of merchants, and they taught therefore every thing and nothing. Here I continued some time as a parlour boarder: I was sent at first amongst the lodgers, and I can remember even now the nauseous

² Isaac Milner, afterwards Dean of Carlisle.

³ At the house of A. Smith Esq. father to the present Lord Carrington, who had married his mother's sister.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02505-8 - The Life of William Wilberforce, Volume 1

Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

RESIDENCE AT HIS UNCLE'S.

5

food with which we were supplied, and which I could not eat without sickness."⁴

He remained two years at this school, spending his holidays at his uncle's house, with occasional visits to Nottingham and Hull. He is described at this time as "a fine sharp lad," whose activity and spirit made up in boyish sports for some deficiency of strength. One incident of these years deserves special notice from its assisting, as he thought, to form what was undoubtedly a striking feature in his later character. He received from the late John Thornton, the brother of his aunt, with whom he was travelling, a present much exceeding the usual amount of a boy's possessions, intended to enforce the precept with which it was accompanied, that some should be given to the poor.

When he quitted Hull no great pains had been taken to form his religious principles. His mother indeed was a woman of real excellence, as well as of great and highly cultivated talents, but not possessed at this time of those views of the spiritual nature of religion, which she adopted in later life: "She was what I should call an Archbishop Tillotson Christian."⁵ But in his uncle's house he was subjected to a new and powerful influence. His aunt was a great admirer of Whitefield's preaching, and kept up a friendly connexion with the early methodists. The lively affections of his heart, warmed by the kindness of his friends, readily assumed their tone. A stranger⁶ has noticed

⁴ Conversational Memoranda.

⁵ *Ib.*

⁶ Private Journal of J. Russel Esq. to whom at this time he sat for

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02505-8 - The Life of William Wilberforce, Volume 1

Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the rare and pleasing character of piety which marked his twelfth year; and there can be little doubt that the acquaintance with holy Scripture and the habits of devotion which he then acquired, fostered that baptismal seed which though long dormant was destined to produce at last a golden harvest.

He has himself recorded his deliberate judgment of this early promise. "Under these influences my mind was interested by religious subjects. How far these impressions were genuine I can hardly determine, but at least I may venture to say that I was sincere. There are letters of mine, written at that period, still in existence, which accord much with my present sentiments."⁷ . . . "A packet from Hull, enclosing letters of mine from Pocklington school rather too much in the style of the religious letters of that day, and (astonishing!) asking my leave to publish them. As I cannot doubt my having expressed the sentiments and feelings of my heart, I am sensibly impressed with a sense of the dreadful effects of the efforts afterwards used but too successfully to wean me from all religion, and to cherish the love of pleasure and the love of glory in the opening bud of youth."⁸

"How eventful a life," he says in looking back to this period in his thirty-eighth year, "has mine been, and how visibly I can trace the hand of God leading me by ways which I knew not! I think I have never

his picture, and of whom he says afterwards, "Mr. Russel painted my picture for W. Hey. He painted me above thirty years before. A religious man, very high-church indeed." *Diary*, July 31, 1801.

⁷ MS. Memoranda.

⁸ *Diary*, Jan. 1, 1831.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02505-8 - The Life of William Wilberforce, Volume 1

Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

RETURN TO YORKSHIRE.

7

before remarked, that my mother's taking me from my uncle's when about twelve or thirteen and then completely a methodist, has probably been the means of my being connected with political men and becoming useful in life. If I had staid with my uncle I should probably have been a bigoted despised methodist; yet to come to what I am, through so many years of folly as those which elapsed between my last year at school and 1785, is wonderful. Oh the depths of the counsels of God! what cause have I for gratitude and humiliation!"⁹

The symptoms of his changing character were perceived with great alarm at Hull, and it was at once determined that his mother should repair to London, and remove him from the dangerous influence.¹⁰ He returned with her to Yorkshire, quitting his uncle's family with deep regret. His presence had kindled their parental feelings, and he had soon returned them the affection of a son. "I deeply felt the parting for I loved them as parents: indeed, I was almost heart-broken at the separation." "I can never forget you," he wrote to his uncle, "as long as I live."

At twelve years old he returned to his mother's

⁹ Journal, April 14, 1797.

¹⁰ His aunt expressed openly her sorrow that he should be removed from the opportunities of a religious life. "You should not fear," replied his mother with a caustic allusion to her peculiar tenets; "if it be a work of grace, you know it cannot fail." "Billy," said his grandfather, "shall travel with Milner as soon as he is of age; but if Billy turns methodist he shall not have a sixpence of mine."

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02505-8 - The Life of William Wilberforce, Volume 1

Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

house, where it became the object of his friends by the seductions of gaiety and self-indulgence to charm away that serious spirit which had taken possession of his youthful bosom—

“ *Et sanctos restinguere fontibus ignes.*”

The habits of society in Hull assisted their design. “It was then as gay a place as could be found out of London. The theatre, balls, great suppers, and card-parties, were the delight of the principal families in the town. The usual dinner hour was two o’clock, and at six they met at sumptuous suppers. This mode of life was at first distressing to me, but by degrees I acquired a relish for it, and became as thoughtless as the rest. As grandson to one of the principal inhabitants, I was every where invited and caressed: my voice and love of music made me still more acceptable. The religious impressions which I had gained at Wimbledon continued for a considerable time after my return to Hull, but my friends spared no pains to stifle them. I might almost say, that no pious parent ever laboured more to impress a beloved child with sentiments of piety, than they did to give me a taste for the world and its diversions.”¹¹ The strength of principle they had to overcome was indeed remarkable. When first taken to a play, it was almost, he says, by force. At length however they succeeded; and the allurements of worldly pleasure led his youth away from all serious thought. At

¹¹ MS. Mem.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02505-8 - The Life of William Wilberforce, Volume 1

Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

EARLY INTEREST IN THE SLAVE TRADE. 9

home there was nothing but gaiety and amusement; at school there was little diligence or restraint. He was placed, soon after his return to Hull, with the Rev. K. Basket, master of the endowed grammar school of Pocklington and formerly Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, a man of easy and polished manners, and an elegant though not profound scholar. Here he was treated with unusual liberality; but, especially during the latter part of his stay, he led a life of idleness and pleasure. His talents for general society with his rare skill in singing rendered him every where an acceptable guest, and his time was wasted in a round of visits to the neighbouring gentry. Already however he gave proofs of an active mind, and one remarkable anticipation of his future course is yet remembered. "His abomination of the slave trade," writes a surviving school-fellow,¹² "he evinced when he was not more than fourteen years of age. He boarded in the master's house, where the boys were kept within bounds. I lived in the village. One day he gave me a letter to put into the post office, addressed to the editor of the York paper, which he told me was in condemnation of the odious traffic in human flesh." He cultivated also a taste for literature. "He greatly excelled all the other boys in his compositions, though he seldom began them till the eleventh hour." For his own amusement he committed English poetry to memory,¹³

¹² Rev. T. T. Walmsley, D. D.¹³ Southey remarks of "Beattie's Minstrel"—Life of Cowper, vol. ii.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02505-8 - The Life of William Wilberforce, Volume 1

Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and he went up to the University “a very fair scholar.”

With the self-indulgent habits formed by such a life he entered St. John's College, Cambridge, Oct. 1776, at the age of seventeen years. And here he was at once exposed to new temptations. Left, by the death of his grandfather and uncle, the master of an independent fortune under his mother's sole guardianship, “I was introduced,” says he, “on the very first night of my arrival, to as licentious a set of men as can well be conceived. They drank hard, and their conversation was even worse than their lives. I lived amongst them for some time, though I never relished their society, . . . often indeed I was horror-struck at their conduct, . . . and after the first year I shook off in great measure my connexion with them.” For the last two years he spent at Cambridge he was the centre of a higher circle. Amiable animated and hospitable, he was a universal favourite. “There was no one,” says the Rev. T. Gisborne, “at all like him for powers of entertainment. Always fond of repartee and discussion, he seemed entirely free from conceit and vanity.” He had already commenced the system of frank and simple hospitality, which marked his London life. “There was always a great Yorkshire pie in his rooms, and all were welcome to partake of it. My

p. 180—“No poem has ever given more delight to minds of a certain class, and in a certain stage of their progress, that class a high one and that stage perhaps the most delightful in their pilgrimage.”—The “Minstrel” was at this time his especial favourite, and was learnt by heart during his morning walks.