

Hull Museum Education

The Significant Buildings and People of High Street

Wilberforce House



Wilberforce House, No. 25 High Street, is Kingston upon Hull's oldest surviving museum, opened to the public in 1906. It takes its name from the building's most famous resident, William Wilberforce, the Abolitionist, who was born there in 1759. The museum is dedicated to the memory of Wilberforce and his campaign to abolish the slave trade.

The building was built during the 1660s for a member of the Lister family, Hull merchants. It is thought that the family acquired the plot of land much earlier, with a building standing on this site from around 1590, owned by John Lister. Like most people on High Street at this time, John Lister was a merchant, enjoying the commercial advantages of the Staithes and passages leading from the High Street to the River Hull. This was the area for ships to dock until Queens Dock was constructed in 1778. John Lister was Mayor of Hull in 1592 and 1612. He was also a Member of Parliament in 1612. He died in 1616 and was succeeded by his son, also John, who became Mayor of Hull twice and Member of Parliament from 1620 until his death in 1640. In 1639 Charles I dined at the Lister home (not the present building) and rested for a night during a tour of Hull.

In 1709 the house passed to John Thornton, one of Hull's leading exporters of cloth and lead at that time. One of his apprentices was a William Wilberforce who had moved to Hull from Beverley to work. Wilberforce, grandfather of the Abolitionist, married his master's daughter in 1711. The house passed to Wilberforce in 1732 and the family began to make their fortune in the Baltic trade. The family began to make extensive alterations to the property. The family crest, the eagle, can be seen on the ceiling of the main staircase, added circa 1760. William Wilberforce, the Abolitionist MP, was the son of Robert and Elizabeth. William lived in the house as a young boy, until the death of his father, when he was sent to live with his aunt and uncle, William Wilberforce and Hannah Thornton, from 1769 to 1771. He returned to Hull at the age of twelve, remaining here until he attended St. John's College, Cambridge in 1776.



25 High Street retained a residential and commercial character until the 1800s. From 1784 to 1829 the premises became the third branch of Smith's Bank, a forerunner of the National Westminster Bank. A clerk, Thomas Thompson, eventually became a partner in the bank and also a Member of Parliament for Hull. One of his sons,

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Thomas Perronet Thompson, was appointed as the First Governor of Sierra Leone. In the early 19th century the Thompson family resided at 25 High Street during the winter months.

William Wilberforce sold the property in 1830 to pay off the debts of his eldest son, William. The house had numerous owners and eventually became the offices of corn merchants and other businesses. The building began to fall into disrepair.

Fortunately, it was purchased by the Corporation of Hull in 1896 and was gradually restored.

Hull's first Curator, Thomas Sheppard, who actively collected material to display to the public, established the quality of the slavery and anti-slavery collections in the early years. The museum continues to expand this collection whenever possible. The museum expanded in 1956 when the adjacent Georgian Houses were acquired and restored. These were built for the tar merchant, James Hamilton around the 1750s.

Wilberforce House Museum is currently undergoing redevelopment and will re-open in March 2007 to celebrate the 200th Anniversary of the abolition of slavery.