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Table of Contents

Introduction[1]

In histories of the abolition of the British slave trade, neither the town nor University of Cambridge have typically occupied any notable role. It appears occasionally as a footnote in the stories of individuals such as Thomas Clarkson or William Wilberforce, both abolitionist leaders having studied at the University and developing some of their characterising views there, but as a British locality in and of itself Cambridge has largely been overlooked in favour of cities with closer links to the slave trade such as London and Liverpool, or emerging industrial urban centres such as Birmingham and Manchester. Michael Jirik and Ronald Hyam's writings on 1784 Vice-Chancellor Peter Peckard are notable outliers for the attention they pay to the University of Cambridge as a key outpost of the early abolitionist movement.[2] Additionally, John Oldfield and Michael Murphy have written on Cambridge newspaper editor Benjamin Flower and his efforts to uphold the urgency of abolition in the 1790s, an otherwise recessive decade for the British abolitionist movement.[3] Yet these writers make little mention of the abolitionist efforts of figures and groups in the broader town, and have not explored any distinctive continuity that existed between them in the late eighteenth century. A closer look at Cambridge of this period shows that not only was the University an important early abolitionist centre, but that the town and University regularly advocated for parliamentary abolition and were home to a group of local and vocal abolitionist individuals whose voices at times extended well beyond their immediate spheres of influence.

My objective in drawing attention to the scholarship deficit on Cambridge abolitionism is not to suggest that the town ought to be accorded a significantly greater space in abolitionist histories. Rather, the objective of this thesis is to examine Cambridge, both town and University, as a unique case study of local abolitionism in the late eighteenth century. Examining Cambridge as an anti-slave trade constituency with actors and arguments distinct from those found in the localities most often studied by historians of abolition, I will seek to

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[1] Over the course of my research I was fortunate to visit several Cambridge libraries and archives (see Bibliography), and I owe a debt of gratitude to the librarians, archivists and historians who gave me assistance. I owe particular thanks to Mary Burgess of the Cambridgeshire Collection for her advice and help with the microfilm records of the *Cambridge Chronicle*. I am also grateful to Professor John Coffey of the University of Leicester for his useful advice and reading recommendations.

[2] Michael E Jirik, "Beyond Clarkson: Cambridge, Black Abolitionists, and the British anti-slave trade campaign", *Slavery & Abolition* 41, no. 4 (2020): 748-771; Ronald Hyam, "Peter Peckard, 'Universal Benevolence', and the Abolition of the Slave Trade", in *Understanding the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 155-77.

[3] John Oldfield, "(Re)mapping Abolitionist Discourse During the 1790s: the Case of Benjamin Flower and the 'Cambridge Intelligencer'", in *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery*, ed. Cora Kaplan and John Oldfield (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); M.J. Murphy, "Benjamin Flower and the Politics of Dissent", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* 68 (1978): 77-88.

draw conclusions about British abolitionism of the period from a different set of figures and sources, revolving around three key abolitionist leaders in the town. Examining the years 1781-1803 (these dates marking the arrival of this thesis' first protagonist and the departure of its third), I will seek to identify abolitionist activity in Cambridge, determine the extent to which it can be characterised as a local movement in and of itself, and ask what can be inferred about British abolitionism more generally on the basis of its local manifestations in Cambridge.

To examine these questions I shall refer to a range of primary sources from eighteenth and nineteenth century Cambridge. The town's two newspapers of the period, the *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal* (hereafter referred to as simply the *Cambridge Chronicle* or the *Chronicle*) and the *Cambridge Intelligencer* (sometimes shortened to simply *Intelligencer*) are one such body of evidence. The former was a conservative paper in print throughout the period under examination, whereas the latter was a radical, liberal publication which existed for ten years from 1793-1803. While newspapers as sources can only reveal so much about the people and attitudes of any historical setting, these two are especially notable for how they characterise Cambridge's political context in the late eighteenth century. The town was by and large a conservative space, consistently voting in Tory members of Parliament, often bearing witness to harassment and sometimes violence directed towards figures not deemed sufficiently loyal to king and country, and dominated by a university which as an institution was firmly wed to the established political order with close links to the government, the crown and the Church of England. The *Chronicle*'s longevity and popularity in Cambridge reflects the town's conservative leanings. And yet, Cambridge was also host to a vocal and influential group of political radicals whose anti-establishment views were influential far beyond the town's borders. One of the most significant of these radical figures was Benjamin Flower, editor and proprietor of the *Cambridge Intelligencer*. The *Intelligencer*, though a provincial newspaper which was only in print for a decade, achieved a remarkable reach with a liberal readership extending across the country during a period of increasing crackdown on press freedoms and views deemed seditious.[4]

In addition to Cambridge's newspapers I will also study two other main bodies of contemporary evidence. Firstly, I will look to some of the town's nineteenth century histories, chiefly Henry Gunning's *Reminiscences of the University, Town and County of Cambridge, from the year 1780* (1854) and Charles Henry Cooper's *Annals of Cambridge: Volume 4*

[4] M.J. Murphy, "NEWSPAPERS AND OPINION IN CAMBRIDGE, 1780-1850", *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 6, no. 1 (1972): 41.

(1852).[5] Both of these offer year by year accounts of notable activity in the town during this period, including records of official town and University petitions in favour of abolition, updates on local governance and politics, and other interesting indications, some from first hand accounts, of the attitudes of Cambridge's inhabitants during the period. Secondly I shall also examine personal writings such as books, letters and sermons written by Cambridge's key abolitionist individuals who are the principal subjects of my study. These will form the main body of evidence for charting the development and nature of abolitionist ideas in the town, and the links between the local people who held them. In addition to these newspapers, histories and personal writings, sources from outside of the town will also be included where relevant, though the majority of my analysis will focus on these three bodies of evidence so as to preserve the local focus of my investigation.

This thesis is divided into four chapters, the first providing a brief, contextual overview of eighteenth century Cambridge, and the other three each centred around a different prominent abolitionist leader, whose views and activities are reflective of different sorts of abolitionist activism in Cambridge throughout the period of study. The first of these three main chapters will present the life and work of Vice-Chancellor Peter Peckard, and the abolitionist activism from the University of Cambridge which he largely inspired during his nine years there from 1781-1790. The second chapter will focus on the Baptist Reverend Robert Robinson, examining his central role in various overlapping movements for reform in the town in the 1780s, with a particular focus on Cambridge's non-university abolitionist activity towards the end of that decade. The third chapter will study the figure of Benjamin Flower, editor of the *Cambridge Intelligencer* which was a powerful source of political radicalism and abolitionist agitation from 1793-1803, a decade which nationally was characterised by government repression and the stagnation of the national movement to abolish the slave trade. Each of these chapters will seek to explore the nature of the abolitionist activism emanating from Cambridge, both with regards to the views of its proponents and the manner in which they mobilised and made themselves heard. The conclusion at the end of this thesis will endeavour to draw these threads together, establish the extent to which abolitionism in Cambridge was distinct and merits inclusion in histories of the British movement, and comment on what legacy if any it leaves for Cambridge today.

The question of legacy is an especially pertinent one at present, and for this reason I sidetrack briefly to mention the present-day University of Cambridge, which in addition to

[5] Henry Gunning, *Reminiscences of the University, Town and County of Cambridge, from the Year 1780*, Volumes 1&2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Charles Henry Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

several of its constituent colleges is currently undertaking projects to investigate its own historical links to slavery, imperialism and the development of ideas around race.[6] Initiated in 2019 before the murder of George Floyd so galvanised introspection on such questions in European and American academic institutions, Cambridge's *Legacies of Enslavement* project was commissioned by Vice-Chancellor Stephen Toope, who in September 2021 announced that he would be stepping down from his role two years early in 2022. Although this decision was explained with regards to the relational strain of the Covid-19 pandemic, and Toope's distance from his family in Canada, the announcement was celebrated by some elements of the British press as a victory in the campaign against "woke" culture, of which Toope had been characterised as a key proponent importing ideas from across the Atlantic.[7] For some of these critics, the Legacies of Enslavement project was one such woke assault on a historic British institution, with one dismissing it as an "ahistorical pandering exercise" at the time of Toope's announcement.[8] While Toope himself and his project are by no means perfect, the cultural and political resonance of these debates involving Cambridge and its past should not be underestimated. A university whose name is a byword for academic excellence has tremendous influence, not just for its example but for the future leaders, innovators and educators who pass through its halls and disperse around the world. The practice of serious introspection on questions of racial and colonial legacies in this space can have an outsized influence, and critics of such initiatives internal and external to the University should bear in mind that this institution has balanced the competing demands of tradition and change before, to produce the legacies they now claim to defend.

Returning to the subject of my study, I do not intend to overlap in any significant way with the University's investigations. Its focus on complicity with slavery and colonialism is a worthy one, though Jirik suggests that perhaps the history of universities and slavery would be better understood in terms of contestation rather than complicity.[9] I believe there is room, and indeed the need, to look for both in order to get the most rounded view of the dynamics of this contested history. This study does not set out to find heroes or villains, only people of

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[6] "Legacies of Enslavement" University of Cambridge, accessed November 2, 2021, https://www.v-c.admin.cam.ac.uk/projects/legacies-of-enslavement

[7] Douglas Murray, "Farewell to Cambridge's Disastrous Vice-Chancellor", *The Spectator*, September 20, 2021, www.spectator.co.uk/article/farewell-to-cambridge-s-disastrous-vice-chancellor; James Gant, "Culture Wars Claim Cambridge Vice-Chancellor: Professor Quits His £365,000-a-Year Job", *Mail Online*, September 22, 2021, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10011281/Culture-wars-claim-Cambridge-vice-chancellor-Professor-quits-365-000-year-job.html; Ben Ellery, "Cambridge Scholars 'Delighted' by Vice-Chancellor Stephen Toope's Early Exit", *The Times*, September 25, 2021, www.thetimes.co.uk/article/few-tears-shed-at-cambridge-for-departing-vice-chancellor-stephen-toope-bwmthjszv.

[8] Murray, "Farewell".

[9] Jirik, "Beyond Clarkson", 750.

the past in their full complexity. Understanding their dynamics, debates and the development of their ideas can benefit our understanding and engagement with histories of slavery today, especially in light of the increasing polarisation of many European societies confronted with colonial pasts, the controversy of Vice-Chancellor Toope being but one example of this. With this in mind I look to study Cambridge abolitionism not just by proxy of its key figures, but also in its context as a social movement which Peckard, Robinson and Flower all offer different perspectives on. Popular pressure has in recent decades been an increasingly attributed factor in explaining the end of slavery and the slave trade in the nineteenth century Anglo-American world, some also suggesting that British antislavery campaigns pioneered modern forms of popular protest.[10] It is not my intention to take sides in the historiographical debates on the reasons for abolition of the British slave trade, though as and where Cambridge as a case study can offer interesting perspectives or evidence on such questions I shall explore these. To borrow the view of Richard Huzzey: "the personnel and practices of political mobilizations can only be understood through close attention to their wider context. A broader understanding, paradoxically, depends on highly focused investigation of cases in which rich documentation reflects the broader political and associational culture from which support for a range of different campaigns or causes might emerge".[11] Cambridge, with its rich intellectual traditions and wealth of evidence on the diverse and divergent views held by its populace in the late eighteenth century, can make for an excellent focus of such an approach.

It should be said that by nature of my focus on those individuals and events discernible in the archives and existing studies of late eighteenth century Cambridge, my study will largely reflect the town of that time with a disproportionate focus on the actions and attitudes of English men, typical of a rural, ethnically homogenous county, a town where women could not study at the University or lead churches, and one with close links to British institutions of civil and religious governance. With this in mind, let my thesis not be mistaken for a testament to the virtue of great religious men, so characteristic of early (though still popular, if disputed) histories of British abolition. Likewise, my lack of focus on the roles of women and slave resistance in the history of abolition is not to disregard their significance, or suggest that either are irrelevant to Cambridge. Ultimately it is not the objective of this text to account for the full myriad of reasons for British abolition of the slave trade. Here the object of study is the local manifestations of the abolitionist movement in Cambridge, and if these

[10] Richard Huzzey, "A Microhistory of British Antislavery Petitioning", *Social Science History* 43, no. 3 (2019): 600.
[11] Ibid, 599.

should contribute to a better understanding of the national or international abolitionist movement then this text will be all the better for it.

Nevertheless, Cambridge abolitionism remains the heart of this study. To this end I have sought to focus on figures and groups distinctly of the locality, for which a brief disclaimer may be required. The number of University of Cambridge members and alumni involved to some degree with the abolitionist movement is significant. Wilberforce for instance is without a doubt the best-known British abolitionist, and he graduated from the University and later remained linked to many old colleagues there, such as his close friend and mentor Isaac Milner who provided him with encouragement and spiritual guidance throughout his political career. Figures like Wilberforce and Milner have not been included in this study as subjects in their own right, because the focus and scope of their abolitionist activity was almost entirely outside of the town. Involvement with Cambridge was for many people transient; countless prominent church and government figures studied there, and were a survey of abolitionist activity to be conducted including all such individuals the scope would be too broad for any conclusions to be drawn particular to Cambridge as its own setting. For this reason I have sought to narrow the scope of this study to those abolitionists whose activism originated from, and was largely targeted at the town of Cambridge and its people. In doing so I seek to identify, understand and evaluate the distinct, local manifestations of the abolitionist movement in Cambridge. In order to study these local manifestations however one must first understand the local(ity), for which this thesis begins with an overview of late eighteenth century Cambridge in Chapter 1.

Chapter 1: Cambridge in the Late Eighteenth Century

As has already been outlined, late eighteenth century Cambridge is a potentially valuable case study from which to explore abolitionism as a socio-political phenomenon in Britain at the time. This chapter will briefly present this chosen setting in order to provide some context for the remainder of the thesis, with a focus on three distinguishing features of the historical town: firstly, that it was a relatively small, provincial town on the periphery of power; secondly that it was a locality dominated by archaic institutions, primarily the University but also to an extent the Corporation, the town's municipal government; thirdly, that Cambridge at this time was a place in contested transition, many of its inhabitants agitating for various civil and religious reforms at the local and national level. In order to understand the backgrounds and motivations of the Cambridge abolitionists who are the primary focus of this thesis, it is necessary to survey this local background.

Cambridge in the year 1781 was a small provincial town. Cambridgeshire was still very much a rural county in a country and period typified by urbanisation and industrialisation; in 1800, it was one of only 7 counties nationally where the number of agricultural workers outnumbered those in all other professions by a ratio of more than two to one.[12] Official government censuses did not begin until 1801, but according to Cooper's *Annals* in 1794 the population of the town was 9868, of which 926 were residents of the University (121 of those servants).[13] Prior to this date the most recent population count, excluding the University, had been in 1749 when the town's population was listed as 6131.[14] The first two censuses of 1801 and 1811 list populations of 10087 and 11108 respectively, counting both town and University residents.[15] Situated roughly 52 miles from London, travelling to or from the capital in the pre-rail age was done by coach; in 1790 several such coaches made this journey every day, taking between eight to ten hours.[16] Several coaches a week also travelled elsewhere in East Anglia, and there was one weekly coach to Birmingham which connected passengers to the rest of the national coach network not otherwise linked via London.

Cambridge's proximity to the capital was not just geographic but represented in the town's close ties to Britain's political and religious elite. Of Britain's fourteen prime ministers in the eighteenth century, five studied at Cambridge (the rest mainly at Oxford, and one at Leiden), and of the eight Archbishops of Canterbury presiding over the Church of England during this time, four were Cambridge graduates. Two of Cambridge's three Chancellors (a prestigious, largely ceremonial but nevertheless influential role) in the eighteenth century were former prime ministers. Additionally, a little under half of eighteenth century MPs had studied at Cambridge or Oxford.[17] The majority of Cambridge alumni went into the clergy, with 60% of Cambridge graduates in the latter half of the eighteenth century ordained.[18] Cambridge was unique in the political makeup of the country for being one of only two places, the other Oxford, which held elections for six MPs at the same time: two for the town, two for the county, and two representing the University, the latter being voted for by Cambridge graduates.[19]

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[12] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (London: Pimlico, 2003), 298.
[13] Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 4, 452.
[14] Ibid, 274.
[15] Ibid, 470 & 494.
[16] Anonymous, *A Concise and Accurate Description of the University, Town and County of Cambridge: Containing a Particular History of the Colleges and Public Buildings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 117 & 133-136.
[17] Gerrit Parmele Judd, *Members of Parliament, 1734-1832* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 42.
[18] John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment: Science, Religion and Politics from the Restoration to the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 21.
[19] Peter Searby, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, Volume 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 386.

If this latter form of parliamentary representation appears archaic it is because Cambridge largely was. Its status as an electoral constituency was one of a number of unique rights held by the University, granted to the institution over time by the crown. These privileges, including such subjects as the right to imprison prostitutes, the right to license ale-houses, and sole supervision over weights and measures in the town, were the subject of frequent, fierce disputes between the University and the Corporation.[20] The Corporation itself, representing the freemen of the town, was also an old and apparently controversial local government body, as evidenced by an anonymous, fiercely critical pamphlet published in 1789. The author writes:

> "Corporations are certainly now become obsolete, and however serviceable they may have been in the infancy of our constitution… their utility has for a long time ceased… If we descend to particulars, and just take a view of the corporation of Cambridge, we surely shall be convinced of its inutility. In what shape does it confer consequence to the Town? Does it in any degree suppress vice, further justice, promote trade, or alleviate distress? I fear the very opposite is the case."[21]

While Cambridge was dominated by old institutions, in the second half of the eighteenth century they would come under increasing pressure to reform. The University in particular was the site of protracted battles over its religious policies, chiefly the mandated adherence to the traditional beliefs of the Church of England. While students and fellows with a variety of Protestant religious views attended the University, they could only graduate upon subscription to the Church of England's core doctrines, the Thirty-nine Articles, and were forbidden from espousing oppositional theology in their sermons, public debates or publications.[22] These restrictions were challenged throughout the eighteenth century by prominent figures within the University, and while they were regularly frustrated, often due to the influence of long-gone, more traditional alumni who retained voting rights in the halls of University decision-making, their efforts did produce for several generations an increased number of students with reformist tendencies and sometimes politically radical views.[23] B.R. Schneider has suggested that the extent to which radical political views, including republicanism, were widespread amongst the late eighteenth century student body has been

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[20] Denys Arthur Winstanley, *Early Victorian Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 122-8.
[21] Anonymous, *Reflections on the contentions and disorder of the corporation of Cambridge* (London, 1789), 5.
[22] Ben Ross Schneider, *Wordsworth's Cambridge Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 115.
[23] Ibid, 117.

possibly obscured by the fact that such controversial views would have often been omitted from their later nineteenth century biographies.[24] Gunning's *Reminiscences*, self-authored, is one outlier which nevertheless hints towards the same conclusion given the self-professed reformist views of his student days.[25]

Like the University, the town Corporation was also under internal pressure at this time, only in the Corporation's case it did indeed change quite drastically, in what Helen Cam described as a "revolution by which the municipal government of Cambridge was in the decade 1780-90 transformed from an oligarchy to a dictatorship".[26] The "dictatorship" in question was that of a certain John Mortlock, a woolen draper who became a freeman of the town in 1778, opened its first bank in 1780, became one of its MPs in 1784 (the town's first locally-born MP in a century), and finally mayor in 1785. Through a combination of influential connections, financial clout and political machinations, Mortlock engineered himself into a position where he was able to re-write the rules of Cambridge town governance in a remarkably short amount of time. Chiefly, he removed the historic restriction on individuals being able to serve as mayor only once every five years (each term was a year long). This accomplished, from 1785 onwards he would be mayor of the town every other year, alternating with his family members, allies and business associates. This would continue until his death in 1816.[27] Through his alliance with the powerful Rutland family, local conservative aristocracy, he not only helped to preserve his own municipal power, but also ensured in return that Cambridge town exclusively elected Tory MPs throughout the decades of his supremacy - these MPs being voted for by the freemen of the Corporation he dominated.[28]

In practice, neither Corporation nor University lost much of their archaic nature in the late eighteenth century. The University resisted pressure for religious reform, and in the politically charged decade of the 1790s doubled down even further on its establishment loyalties, as shall be explored later in this paper. The Corporation on the other hand, while witnessing a profound power shift at governance level, remained for the aforementioned anonymous pamphleteer the epitome of a failed system of local government. Going by the evidence of its activity revealed in a later infamous court case in 1833, there is not much grounds on which

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[24] Ibid, 143.
[25] Gunning, *Reminiscences*, Volume 1, 326-33.
[26] Helen Cam, "Quo Warranto Proceedings at Cambridge 1780-1790", *Cambridge Historical Journal* 8, no. 3 (1946): 145.
[27] Helen Cam, "John Mortlock III, 'Master of the Town of Cambridge'", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* 40 (1944): 1–12.
[28] Ibid, 7-8.

to refute this.[29] Nevertheless, Cambridge's distinct political and religious context of archaic privilege did give rise, particularly at the University, to something of a reformer counter-culture which lent itself well to abolitionism. This may partly explain why a comparatively small town in a rural county would host so many influential abolitionist thinkers and agitators in the late eighteenth century.

The abolitionist views of these individuals often overlapped significantly with their views on political and religious freedom, and the debates on these subjects prompted by the University and its policies in particular created space for reformist ideas to develop. Many of the town's abolitionists and other reformers were Dissenters - Protestants such as Baptists, Quakers and Unitarians whose religious views diverged from those of the established Anglican Church. These Dissenters, especially the late eighteenth century subset of Rational Dissenters who placed a higher emphasis on reason in their religious views, were organised and persistent advocates for religious and political reforms they thought necessary to guarantee their freedoms. We shall see how towards the end of the eighteenth century the approaches of different groups of abolitionists in and outside of Cambridge would go on to diverge along the battle lines of other issues. To begin with however, in the 1780s themselves and early 1790s, Cambridge's abolitionists were largely united. In the following two chapters I will explore abolitionism in Cambridge during this time, examining its key leaders and their level of influence. The first such leader I will look at is Peter Peckard.

Chapter 2: Peter Peckard and Abolitionism at the University of Cambridge, 1781-90

The figure of Peter Peckard is largely overlooked in histories of the abolition of the slave trade, if mentioned at all usually only as a footnote in the story of Thomas Clarkson.[30] Clarkson was a student at Cambridge in the 1780s and it was at the University that he adopted his abolitionist views, first articulated in an essay he wrote in response to an exam question set by Peckard on the legitimacy of enslaving people against their will.[31] Yet Peckard himself was a passionate opponent of the slave trade, whose fiery sermons against it not only radicalised Clarkson but many others in the University and town of Cambridge as well. In this chapter I will present an overview of Peckard's life, examine the dissemination

[29] J.P.C. Roach, *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely: Volume 3, the City and University of Cambridge* (London: Victoria County History, 1959), 15-29, http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/cambs/vol3/pp15-29.
[30] Jirik, "Beyond Clarkson", 766.
[31] Ibid, 749.

and nature of his abolitionist views, and reflect on how his influence not only extended into the national campaign against the slave trade through Clarkson, but helped turn Cambridge into an early abolitionist stronghold as well.

Peter Peckard was born in 1717 or 1718, the son of a country clergyman. In 1734 he entered Corpus Christi College at Oxford University where he appears to have spent at least the next 10 years, apparently living wildly - he was repeatedly punished for drunkenness, bringing women into his chambers and other poor behaviour.[32] Nevertheless he achieved his BA and MA at the college before becoming a priest in 1746. By 1755, he had become an army chaplain and remained one until he was appointed Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge in 1781, by the patronage of an aristocratic army connection. In the intervening years Peckard had married into an influential family himself, the wealthy and prestigious Ferrars of Huntingdonshire, and he settled in a village near Peterborough which was not far from Cambridge. From this home base Peckard appears to have been drawn into Cambridge's theological and reformist orbit, associating with and learning from prominent Cambridge figures like Edmund Law and John Jebb, both of whom had fought over the years to open Cambridge up to greater religious toleration.[33] By the time Peckard became University Vice-Chancellor in 1784 he was already demonstrating a keen sense of justice and an appetite for reform: his first published sermon in 1753 had been in defence of Jewish rights, he had fought long-running court cases on behalf of impoverished residents of his village who were being swindled by a local notable, and he had been an active supporter of the campaigns for religious toleration at the University.[34] It was these two characteristics which committed him to the defining cause of his activism in the late eighteenth century, the abolition of the slave trade.

Peckard's abolitionist views and efforts can be traced through five published documents, four sermons and a pamphlet, which can still be read in full today. The first of these was a sermon preached in 1783 before Great St Mary's, Cambridge's University Church. In this sermon Peckard set out his views on man's natural right to liberty and its relation to government. In the ideal state of liberty, Peckard wrote, "All Men are equal, all being subject to the Authority, and all enjoying the Protection of Law".[35] Asserting the inherent human right to liberty as granted by God, he challenged the notion that any state or institution can

[32] John Walsh and Ronald Hyam, *Peter Peckard, Liberal Churchman and Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (Cambridge: Magdalene College, 1998), 1-2.
[33] Ibid, 5-6.
[34] Ibid, 5-9.
[35] Peter Peckard, *The nature and extent of civil and religious liberty. A sermon preached before the University of Cambridge, November the 5th. 1783. By Peter Peckard, A.M. Master of Magdalen College* (Cambridge, 1783), 9.

rightfully deprive it. Referring to biblical instructions to submit to one's governors, he argued that any authority misusing its power to restrict liberty was in fact a "Minister of Evil", against which resistance is fully justified.[36] Turning to the slave trade, Peckard condemned it as a most horrendous crime - "How deep then in the sight of God must be the complexion of our Guilt, who blush not professedly to make the Natural Liberty of Man an article of public Commerce!" - and invoked the impending punishment of God upon both individuals and the state which countenance it.[37]

Two months later in January 1784, Peckard preached again at Great St Mary's, this time on the occasion of a Feast Day commemorating the martyrdom of King Charles I. Peckard subverted the occasion to instead directly attack the slave trade, even replacing the event's predetermined prayers with ones of his own dedicated to the enslaved in the West Indies.[38] In this sermon he castigated again the fact that by British legislature and state sanction people were being enslaved. He specifically criticised the racialised basis on which the slave trade was exercised, asking "Shall then the form of features, think ye, or tincture of the skin be considered as circumstances that can invert the nature of moral actions?".[39] Asserting the common humanity of mankind alongside the God-given right to freedom, Peckard demanded why difference in appearance should be grounds on which to subvert moral law. Again he invoked the prospect of divine retribution, and drew deliberate attention to national wrong-doing: "we craftily sow the seeds of dissension amongst them, that they may work their own destruction by delivering each other into our hands: we steal them, we buy them, we sell them; we consign them to perpetual Slavery".[40] In a footnote added to the text of the published sermon, Peckard takes the point further: "I say it with reluctance, that your country's conduct has been uniformly wicked on the coast of Guinea".[41] It is interesting to note here that Peckard does not seek to evade British involvement in the selling of slaves within Africa, alluding to the manipulation used to fuel the trade; such arguments made in 1784 carry added pertinence today when culpability for transatlantic slavery continues to be commonly displaced onto Africans themselves.[42] Furthermore on this theme, Peckard's attacks on slavery do not focus on the plantocracy or on slave traders themselves, but rather assigns responsibility to the nation as a whole; with his repeated use of 'we' and 'our' when

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[36] Ibid, 5.
[37] Ibid, 10-11.
[38] Walsh and Hyam, *Peter Peckard*, 16.
[39] Peter Peckard, *Piety, Benevolence, and Loyalty, recommended. A sermon preached before the University of Cambridge, January the 30th, 1784. Published at the request of the Vice-Chancellor and Heads of Colleges. By Peter Peckard, A. M. Master of Magdalen College* (Cambridge, 1784), 6.
[40] Ibid, 4-5.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Akala, *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire* (London: Two Roads, 2018), 125, 127 & 137-8.

referring to the ills of slavery, and his repeated criticisms of the legislative system by which enslavement is sanctioned, Peckard challenged his audience to take accountability. As we shall see in the coming pages, this challenge was clearly effective - most notably in the figure of Thomas Clarkson who, having sat in the congregation at Great St Mary's on the day of Peckard's sermon, was first radicalised there. A year later he would write his prize-winning thesis on the slavery question, in 1787 he would be one of the founding members of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (hereafter the Abolition Society), and in 1788 he would galvanise the first national petitioning campaign against the trade, the first popular abolitionist movement in Britain.

Peckard's next two published abolitionist texts came in 1788; another sermon preached at Great St Mary's in February, and an anonymous pamphlet sent to Parliament to coincide with the petition campaign. In both texts of this year Peckard increasingly focused on combating racist arguments used by supporters of the slave trade to justify it. In both texts, one by one Peckard identifies and deconstructs lines of arguments used to defend slavery, whether appeals to historical practice, ideas of African inferiority, or claims to biblical justification. In the Parliament pamphlet in particular he addresses racist arguments in detail, over the course of 105 pages, asserting along the way African proficiency in music, medicine, poetry and moral writing with reference to examples drawn from Africans living in Britain, The United States and on the African continent itself.[43] He also challenged by name a contemporary pro-slavery pamphlet written by a clergyman seeking to excuse slavery with reference to the Bible.[44] Jirik in his article highlights how at this time the influence of black abolitionists was increasingly evident in Peckard's arguments, as he referred to the work and examples of Ignatius Sancho and Phyllis Wheatley in particular to support his arguments for racial equality.[45] These arguments went further than those in his previous writings, going beyond the principle of a universal right to liberty and more explicitly asserting a universal right to humanity. Other tenets of his abolitionist arguments remained more similar, such as his insistence on a form of common culpability for the evil of the slave trade; one such point he made in his February sermon was to contrast the evils of historic kings and despots with that of the contemporary trade, stating that while the former were individual acts of wrongdoing, "in the latter, the Evil is a Systematic Institution of hardness of heart".[46] As with his call to action of 1784, Peckard's 1788 sermon also stirred a response in Cambridge. In

[43] Peter Peckard, *Am I not a man? and a brother? With all humility addressed to the British legislature* (Cambridge, 1788), 15-23.
[44] Ibid, 23-46.
[45] Jirik, "Beyond Clarkson", 757-9.
[46] Peter Peckard, *Justice and mercy recommended, particularly with reference to the Slave Trade. A sermon preached before the University of Cambridge, By P. Peckard, D.D. Master of Magdalen College* (Cambridge, 1788), 27.

the months that followed the *Cambridge Chronicle* received a flurry of supportive letters and poems on the subject of abolition, several referencing Peckard by name and echoing his arguments.[47] That year also saw the University, the Corporation and the County of Cambridgeshire all dispatch petitions to Parliament in support of abolition.[48]

On 31 January 1790 Peckard preached his final sermon at Great St Mary's, under the emphatic title "The Neglect of a Known Duty is a Sin".[49] In this sermon he theologically unpacked the extent to which ignorance can sanction wrongdoing, and in concluding that it cannot do so in the case of the evil trade, again sought to rally his congregation against it. In light of the horrifying evidence of the trade brought to public attention in recent campaigns, and the countless petitions that these had motivated to be sent to Parliament, he castigated the government for their inaction, his sermon peppered with derisory comments on "politicians" and "mercantile men" who prioritise corruption and worldly profit over Christian duty to their fellow man.[50] He ended with a reminder that when passing from this life to the next, these advantages in rank and wealth will be rendered meaningless and that each will be judged on a different basis, with which in mind: "May they therefore no longer be deaf to the cries of Justice and Humanity, no longer consciously transgress a known duty of their Religion, because to him who knoweth to do Good, and doeth it not, to him it is Sin.".[51]

These sermons and pamphlet are a rich reflection of the nature and development of Peckard's abolitionist thought over the course of the 1780s. Yet they were not his only contributions to the abolitionist cause. Jirik explores in detail Peckard's relationship with abolitionist Olaudah Equiano, who not only helped shape his views but was also supported by Peckard in return, who helped promote Equiano's autobiography with letters of introduction and a written recommendation included in the best-selling book from its third edition onwards.[52] Equiano visited Cambridge and reflected warmly on the welcome and support he received there from both members of the town and University, even sending a letter of thanks to the *Cambridge Chronicle*.[53] Peckard was no doubt influential, through his sermons and broader activities, in promoting the cause of abolition at the University of

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[47] Jirik, "Beyond Clarkson", 759-60; Della Crusca, "The Slaves. An Elegy", *Cambridge Chronicle*, March 8, 1788; Humanity, "To the Printer of the Cambridge Chronicle", *Cambridge Chronicle*, April 26, 1788; Anonymous, "The African", *Cambridge Chronicle*, April 26, 1788.
[48] Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 4, 426-7.
[49] Peter Peckard, *The neglect of a known duty is sin. A sermon preached before the University of Cambridge, on Sunday, Jan. 31, 1790. By P. Peckard, D. D. Master of Magdalen College* (Cambridge, 1790).
[50] Ibid, 21, 27 & 28.
[51] Ibid, 33.
[52] Jirik, "Beyond Clarkson", 761-3.
[53] Olaudah Equiano, "To the printer of the Cambridge Chronicle", *Cambridge Chronicle,* August 1, 1789.

Cambridge. When the Abolition Society was formed in 1787, the list of subscribers included an entire section dedicated to the University, including 76 named individual subscribers, 9 of the 16 colleges, and 2 further group subscriptions from “some members of” Jesus College and Christ College.[54] Peckard himself was named in this section, and his wife appears elsewhere in the list. Jirik speculates that Peckard may have helped write the anti-slave trade petition sent to Parliament by the University in 1788; whether or not this is the case, there can be no doubt that Peckard’s outspoken activism influenced both this abolitionist petition and the second one sent by the University in 1792, as well as its other supportive measures.[55] These included gifts of money to the Abolition Society and the support of its MPs in Parliament (one of which was Prime Minister and Wilberforce ally William Pitt the Younger), where the University’s petitions were powerful support for the abolitionist campaign there.[56] In 1791 abolitionist MP James Martin referred to one of these (presumably that of 1788) extensively in a parliamentary debate, praising and quoting from it for the caliber of its arguments, drawing on the weight it carried coming from such an elite academic institution, and using it as further evidence of the “unanimity in the country” in support of the abolitionist cause.[57]

In assessing Peter Peckard’s contribution to the abolitionist cause in Britain, it is not unreasonable to begin with his influence on Thomas Clarkson. Indeed, as one nineteenth century biographer of the famous abolitionist would have it, the essay question Peckard set would change the course of history: “Great effects have often sprung from little causes… so did a College Essay by an Undergraduate of Cambridge, lead to the glorious abolition of the African slave-trade by the whole Christian world, and the extinction of slavery throughout the entire British Empire”.[58] While undoubtedly hyperbolic, exponentially so considering the advancements in historians’ understanding of abolition since the mid nineteenth-century, the author is not wrong to assert that small acts can yield significant dividends. Peckard was a powerful preacher whose sermons and other writings influenced not only Clarkson, who gave Peckard this credit in his own history of abolition, but many others as well, especially in Cambridge.[59] The reactions to his sermons in the *Cambridge Chronicle* are but one contemporary indication of their effect, but evidence of the deeper and more lasting influence

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[54] Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, *List of the Society, instituted in 1787, for the purpose of effecting the abolition of the slave trade* (London, 1788), unpaginated.
[55] Jirik, “Beyond Clarkson”, 760; Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 4, 443.
[56] Abolition Society, “Notice from the Abolition Society”, *Cambridge Chronicle*, July 14, 1792.
[57] Thomas Clarkson, *The history of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade by the British Parliament*, Volume 2 (London, 1808), 261-3.
[58] James Elmes, *Thomas Clarkson: a Monograph, Being a Contribution Towards the History of the Abolition of the Slave-Trade and Slavery* (London: Blackader and Co, 1854), 2-3.
[59] Thomas Clarkson, *The history of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade by the British Parliament*, Volume 1 (London, 1808), 203-7.

of his arguments can be seen in the way that his language of abolition set the standard for the movement in Cambridge. As already noted, Jirik has suggested Peckard's involvement in the writing of the University's petition of 1788, and while there is no concrete evidence of this, the wording of the petition itself clearly echoes Peckard's theology and abolitionist arguments. It asserts the status of Africans as "fellow creatures" and "parts of mankind"; chastises the prioritisation of commerce over morality; refers to the way in which, "encouraging treachery, exciting war, as well as by forcing", Britons enslave Africans; and appeals to the spirit of the British constitution and true, benevolent religion, both of which should defend liberty but are instead usurped.[60] Peckard's abolitionist precepts are perhaps best defined in his introduction to the pamphlet he sent to Parliament in 1788. Written anonymously, he identifies himself as follows: "the Author is a sincere and zealous friend to the Rights of Man, to the Civil Constitution, and real Honour of his Country, and to the Christian Religion; particularly to that divine precept of doing every possible kindness to all our fellow creatures. This sets him above all partial attachments whatsoever, that exclude a General Goodwill, and inspires him with disinterested and Universal Benevolence".[61] Ronald Hyam has defined "universal benevolence", with its personal commitment to justice and humanity, as central to Peckard's own brand of open-minded religion and the abolitionist views it underpinned.[62] In the final decades of the eighteenth century the four themes with which Peckard aligned himself - the rights of man, the civil constitution, the honour of the country and the Christian religion - would be recurring ones in the arguments of Cambridge abolitionists. His pioneering influence on the subject of the slave trade paved the way for an outspoken and surprisingly influential body of abolitionists to develop in Cambridge. In considering the question of the character or even existence of any distinctly local abolitionist movement in the town, Peckard's activism and views are an essential starting point.

Chapter 3: Robert Robinson and Abolitionism in Cambridge Town, 1780-90

In 1789 the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, the oldest of its kind in the United States, received a charter of incorporation from the state, granting it new legal status and privileges. This was a significant occasion for a group of ever-growing influence, and came with an Act of Incorporation which included a large list of the society's members. Among the roughly 2000 names recorded is a small contingent of British allies holding official membership, including such prominent abolitionists as Granville Sharp, William Wilberforce and Thomas

[60] Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 4, 426.
[61] Peckard, *Am I not a man? and a brother?*, i.
[62] Hyam, 'Peter Peckard, 'Universal Benevolence'', 165.

Clarkson. Conspicuously out of place however is the presence of a certain Mr William Hollick, a 37-year old grocer from Cambridge, and the Reverend Robert Robinson, both of St Andrew's Street Baptist Church in the town.[63] The inclusion of these two individuals is remarkable because, unlike their better-known British companions on the list, they were not well-connected, highly mobile anti-slavery activists. They stand out, by contrast, as a pair of ordinary people from Cambridge.

Of course, their inclusion in this document hints that they weren't so ordinary. In fact, they and their church community are quite noteworthy, St Andrew's Street having achieved by the late 1780s a reputation for being one of the "most theologically heterodox and politically radical Particular Baptist congregations in England".[64] This reputation was largely down to the leadership of Robinson, described by Peter Searby as "the most prominent Rational Dissenter in Cambridge", who was minister of the church from 1761 until his death in 1790.[65] During his time there he not only oversaw extraordinary church growth which turned the fortunes of St Andrew's Street around, but became one of the town's most prominent intellectuals and activists, his sermons drawing socially diverse listeners from all over Cambridgeshire and beyond. In this chapter I will present Robinson's life, his church and his political views, especially as they pertain to abolitionism; I will consider his influence on and connections to other abolitionist townsmen, and consider the nature of the network they formed; and lastly I will consider how the influence of these ordinary abolitionists extended beyond their locality, even so far as for a humble grocer from Cambridge to feature alongside the likes of Benjamin Franklin on the membership list of the oldest abolitionist society in the United States.

Robert Robinson was born in 1735 in Swaffham, Norfolk, situated roughly 45 miles north-east of Cambridge. He appears to have come from something of a troubled home; his mother came from a family of means and married below her station, to her father's disapproval who left her to struggle financially upon the death of her husband a few years after. Young Robinson was clearly a boy of considerable intelligence and for a time he attended school, despite the strained finances of the family, before moving to London in

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[63] Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, *Constitution and act of incorporation of the Pennsylvania Society, for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Free Negroes, Unlawfully held in Bondage. And for Improving the Condition of the African Race. To which are added, the acts of the General Assembly o Pennsylvania for the gradual abolition of slavery, and the acts of the Congress of the United States, respecting slaves and the slave trade. [Three lines from Matthew]* (Philadelphia, 1800), 13.
[64] Timothy Whelan, "Coleridge and Robert Hall of Cambridge", *The Wordsworth Circle* 31, no. 1 (2000): 38.
[65] Searby, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, 405.

1749 to become a barber's apprentice.[66] In the years that followed the teenage Robinson became increasingly religious, coming under the influence of firebrand evangelist George Whitfield in 1752, whom he would later refer to as his "spiritual father".[67] Deciding to pursue a career in ministry he developed his preaching skills over the rest of that 1750s, leaving London in 1758 to take up his first two ministerial positions in quick succession in his native Norfolk. In 1759 he was invited to preach his first sermon at St Andrew's Street, and by 1761 he had become the permanent pastor there and relocated to Cambridge.

When he arrived in Cambridge the town's Baptist congregation was in a sorry state. It numbered as few as 34, largely poor members when Robinson first preached there, and it occupied a small building described as a "damp, dark, cold, ruinous, contemptible hovel".[68] Robinson's leadership and reputation as a preacher soon turned this around however, and a new meeting house was required in 1764 to accommodate the church's growing numbers, which by 1775 amounted to 120 official members with a weekly attendance of 600-800 people going into the 1780s.[69] Considering the size of Cambridge at the time, which the limited figures in Chapter 1 suggest might be somewhere between 7000-9000 people, this could mean that on an average Sunday the equivalent of up to 1 in 10 residents of Cambridge might hear Robinson speak. He preached to a broad spectrum of people, giving weekly evening lectures for University undergraduates, ministering in private homes and barns to 13 villages around Cambridge by 1774, and of course fulfilling his duties at St Andrew's Street, the members of which are shown in the Church Book to have been drawn from a range of social and professional backgrounds.[70] Listed by name, location and occupation among other things, the church book's records show that the vast majority of its members were drawn from lower to middle class professions, the top three most common for men being labourers, shoemakers and (jointly) farmers and tailors, the top three for women being servants, spinners and nurses.[71] Both Robinson and his church had humble beginnings, but over the course of his tenure they won a respect and reputation in Cambridge and beyond, largely down to his leadership in the church and community, and the keen intellect frequently demonstrated in his sermons and writings.

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[66] George Dyer, *Memoirs of the life and writings of Robert Robinson, Late Minister of the Dissenting Congregation, in Saint Andrew's Parish, Cambridge. By George Dyer, Late Of Emanuel College, Cambridge* (London, 1796), 1-11.
[67] Ibid, 18.
[68] "History", St Andrew's Street Baptist Church, accessed November 27, 2021, https://www.stasbaptist.org/Groups/239182/Our_History.aspx.
[69] James E. Bradley, "Religion and Reform at the Polls: Nonconformity in Cambridge Politics, 1774-1784", *Journal of British Studies* 23, no. 2 (1984): 59-60.
[70] Ibid, 60
[71] Robert Robinson, *Church Book: St Andrew's Street Baptist Church, Cambridge 1720-1832* (Baptist Historical Society, 1991), 120-30.

As with Peter Peckard, Robinson fortunately left behind a rich repository of written material which sheds light on his views. Like many other protestant nonconformists in Britain, he appears to have started down the road to political radicalisation in the 1770s.[72] Dissenters in this period were allowed to operate but had to swear various oaths of allegiance, register their churches, were excluded from certain government roles, and as already mentioned were heavily restricted at the University of Cambridge and elsewhere if they did not subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles. In the early years of his ministry Robinson had complied with the requirements placed on him as a Dissenter, but by 1774 he expressed his regret at having done so.[73] In a 1777 letter to a friend he expressed his grief that so many enquiring Cambridge undergraduates should come to him to discuss their doubts in the evening and swear allegiance to the established church in order to graduate the morning after.[74] Increasingly troubled by the state of religious and civil freedoms in Britain, one of Robinson's first clear political interventions came in 1774, when he published an appeal to the freemen of the Corporation of Cambridge calling on them to vote against the government's candidates in the upcoming general election.[75] In December of 1775 his name appeared in a Cambridge petition calling on the government to adopt a more conciliatory approach to American colonists after the outbreak of violence there.[76] Over the course of the decade he also began to set out his views in published texts, often on religious subjects. By the end of the 1770s however they were taking on a more distinctly political nature, and in 1782 he published *A political catechism*, in which he laid out his views on good governance and the British constitution in the format of a series of conversations between a fictional parent and child on such subjects as taxation, representation and responsibility.[77] In it he advocated for independence of thought, vicariously telling the child/reader: "Remember tomorrow - and take one short lesson for this day - dare to think for yourself - If you must perish, ruin yourself, and don't let other men ruin you by inculcating credulity and diffidence"; he asserted that liberty is a natural right of mankind, one which the British constitution is representative of first and foremost; and implicitly criticised the problematic absence of representation in the British electoral system.[78]

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[72] Bradley, "Religion and Reform at the Polls", 62.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Robert Robinson and William Robinson, *Select Works of the Rev. Robert Robinson, of Cambridge* (London, 1861), 190-1.
[75] Ibid, 63.
[76] *Cambridge Chronicle*, December 9, 1775.
[77] Robert Robinson, *A political catechism* (London, 1782).
[78] Ibid, 25, 31, 38 & 57.

Robinson was known for his direct and digestible manner of preaching, Gunning quoting him once as saying “It is a rule with me never to use an expression which the humblest of my hearers cannot understand”.[79] His *Political Catechism* is a clear representation of this practical and inclusive approach, delivered as it is in the manner of a parent explaining the principles of good governance. It also represented a consolidation of his political views to encompass not just religious reform but the political reform required to achieve this in the British context of the late eighteenth century. Many historians have written on the conjunction of movements for greater religious toleration, parliamentary reform and abolitionism in this period.[80] This was especially pertinent in Cambridge in light of the debates surrounding the University’s religious policy, and Robinson was at the centre of the 1780s reformist confluence in the town.

In 1783 Robinson formed an association called the Cambridge Constitutional Society, modelled on the Society for Constitutional Information set up in London in 1780. The aforementioned Cambridge reformer John Jebb, who had left the University and moved to London in 1776, was a key member of this latter group, and it had been he who sent some of its records to Robinson at the time of its founding.[81] The purpose of these groups was to advocate for parliamentary reform, and Robinson’s Society attracted a range of interesting figures from across town and university to its quarterly meetings. These included on at least one occasion Mayor Mortlock and several of the Corporation’s aldermen, and Robinson was of the view that the Society had acquired for the Dissenters of Cambridge and its surroundings “a great respectability… (and) a great political weight”.[82] Whether through this Society, through St Andrew's Street or through his other miscellaneous friendships and connections, Robinson was linked to a diverse array of Dissenters and reformers in Cambridge. While the evidence of these connections is often second-hand and can be tenuous, they point to a network of ordinary people who often came together around Robinson when their views found common ground in shared causes. One such cause was the movement to abolish the slave trade.

While there is no explicit record of Robinson’s views on the slave trade prior to the commencement of the national movement against it in the 1780s, once this had begun he was clearly a staunch and engaged abolitionist, one historian suggesting that he was the

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[79] Gunning, *Reminiscences*, Volume 2, 130.
[80] Anstey et al, *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1980); Bradley, “Religion and Reform at the Polls”.
[81] Schneider, *Wordsworth’s Cambridge Education*, 124-5; Dyer, *Memoirs of the life and writings of Robert Robinson*, 193-4.
[82] Dyer, *Memoirs of the life and writings of Robert Robinson*, 194.

chief moving spirit of abolitionism in Cambridge at this time.[83] It is not possible to qualify this assertion with any certainty, but it is plausible considering that by this time Robinson occupied a unique position at the heart of the town's networks of religious and civil reformers, many of whom nationally during this time were coalescing in support of abolition. Robinson's friend and biographer George Dyer claimed that Robinson wrote the first petition against the slave trade to be sent to Parliament, and though this is very unlikely (the timing of the writing itself is impossible to prove) Robinson did indeed pen the petition presented by the County of Cambridgeshire to the House of Commons on 12 March 1788.[84] Robinson also attacked the slave trade in his sermons, and one of these, preached in February 1788, was subsequently published. It is from this sermon that the nature of his abolitionist views can be most directly determined.

As can be expected, Robinson's views on slavery and the slave trade derived in large part from his understanding of Christianity. In his published sermon Robinson explores the concept of liberty in the Bible and in Christian history, asserting that "Christianity is, as an apostle calls it, a 'perfect law of liberty', and its natural and genuine produce is universal justice, or, which is the same thing, universal freedom".[85] That Robinson should have aligned justice and freedom so unequivocally is unsurprising considering his desire for civil and religious equality in Britain, which he also brought into the sermon. Among his key messages was a call for his congregation to educate their children on the importance of freedom and the dangers posed to it: "Let us call them to our knee, and early inspire them with the love of virtuous freedom. Let us teach them the natural connection between civil and religious liberty, and the indispensable obligation of fostering both. Let us shew them where encroachments on natural rights begin, and whither they tend".[86] As previously demonstrated in his *Political Catechism*, education was an important theme for Robinson in his advocacy for civil and religious freedom. This was not just the result of his known desire to make his sermons as accessible and digestible as possible, but also a reflection of the methods employed by the Constitutional Societies of the early 1780s, which ran political education campaigns in order to teach people about their rights and drive popular agitation for change.[87]

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[83] Frida Knight, *University Rebel: the Life of William Frend (1757-1841)* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1971), 65-6.
[84] Dyer, *Memoirs of the life and writings of Robert Robinson*, 195-6; Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 4, 427.
[85] Robinson, Robert. *Slavery inconsistent with the spirit of Christianity. A sermon preached at Cambridge, On Sunday, Feb. 10, 1788, By Robert Robinson* (Cambridge, 1788), 11.
[86] Ibid, 24-5.
[87] Schneider, *Wordsworth's Cambridge Education*, 133 & 139; P.A. Brown, *The French Revolution in English History* (London: Routledge, 1965), 19.

In addition to his points on the nature of Christian freedom and its links to civil and religious liberty, Robinson also made abolitionist arguments that echoed those Peckard had been making in the years leading up to 1788. He mentioned the principle of universal benevolence as he called on his congregation to aspire to “charity” as the greatest of God’s gifts - that is to say that a charitable or universally benevolent character is the best gift that God can give, and the congregation should seek it.[88] Like Peckard, Robinson also drew attention to the underhand tactics used to fuel war and supply the trade on the African continent, and clearly defined slavery as a shared, national disgrace: “although it is unpleasant to blame one's nation, yet we must say, and we say it with sincere sorrow, while we boast of freedom at home, and zealously oppose every attempt to diminish it, we annually reduce a people, who never injured us, to a servitude unmerited, unjust, and to an enormous degree barbarous, as well as disgraceful to our country.”.[89] He mentioned with abhorrence the fact that as recently as in 1772 advertisements had been placed in London newspapers offering reward for the recapture of escaped slaves in the capital, referencing Granville Sharp in the printed version of the sermon and indicating familiarity with abolitionist literature.[90] Contrasting the practice by which Britons enslaved and demeaned Africans with the manner in which they defended their own rights and liberties at home, Robinson again situated his arguments in the context of other ongoing movements for civil and religious liberty. Also like Peckard, one of Robinson’s concluding points was to invoke the prospect of justified slave resistance, saying that if freedom were not soon granted to the enslaved, “the world should applaud them in future for taking it by force!”.[91]

In other areas however Robinson’s arguments diverged somewhat from Peckard’s, in two main respects. While both preachers clearly considered slavery a moral ill, Peckard’s views appear to have been principally underpinned by a sincere belief in the equality of humankind, which he sought to argue not just theologically but with reference to black abolitionists and African achievements. Robinson on the other hand appears more concerned with defending Christianity, certainly in the case of his sermon as he admited in the written appendix published with it in 1788: “This discourse… was composed less for the purpose of exposing the iniquity of the African slave trade, than for that of vindicating the character of the primitive Christians, or rather the credit of Christianity itself, which is grossly misrepresented when it is described as compatible with slavery”.[92] Another area in which Robinson and Peckard differed was that the former also placed greater emphasis on the

[88] Robinson, *Slavery inconsistent*, 13.
[89] Ibid, 20.
[90] Ibid, 23-4.
[91] Ibid, 25.
[92] Ibid, 27.

economic benefits of abolition. In the appendix to his published sermon he presented the African continent as “the best situated for commerce of any other quarter of the world”.[93] Listing the myriad riches, resources and beneficial conditions of the continent, he upheld the example of the Dutch East India Company and its success in the spice islands as a model, arguing that the only impediment to similar successes for Britain on the African continent was the continued dominance of the slave trade and the havoc it wrought on coastal areas.[94] Like Peckard, Robinson considered the slave trade a national shame, especially hypocritical coming from a nation espousing Christianity and with liberty an ostensibly key component of its constitution. But in his case, some of his arguments hint that perhaps the conclusion was that the nation required redeeming, rather than that the enslaved needed saving; and that moreso, abolition of the slave trade could be of benefit to the continued expansion of British commerce and influence. This is further reflected in the language of the County petition of 1788 that he authored, which includes a commercial argument: “Your petitioners humbly represent, that a slave trade is neither just, nor safe, nor, in the present case, productive; for it obstructs other branches of traffic, which promise far greater national advantages”.[95] The petition asserts strongly that the trade is a national disgrace and an evil which the petitioners abhor, but ultimately entreats Parliament to “grant such relief as they in their great wisdom shall see fit.”.[96] By contrast, the town and University petitions not written by Robinson are more explicit in their requests for the slave trade to be totally abolished, and accord less importance to the notion of economically or morally superior commerce which might arise from abolition.[97]

Regardless of the exact nature of his views which can ultimately only be speculated upon, Robinson remained a potent agitator for abolition in Cambridge, with many of the town’s known abolitionists involved with him to some degree. One such figure was Peter Musgrave, a tailor, draper and prominent advocate of reform in the town. He was a friend of Henry Gunning, who records in his reminiscences that Musgrave was “particularly intimate” with abolitionists including Thomas Clarkson, hosted anti-slavery committees at his house, donated to anti-slavery funds and was a shareholder in the Sierra Leone Company.[98] Gunning separately notes that Musgrave would often attend Robinson’s sermons (though he himself was not a Baptist) and would share with Gunning many anecdotes regarding the preacher; Dyer’s *Memoirs* also note the connection between the two men, singling out

[93] Ibid, 37.
[94] Ibid, 37-9.
[95] Dyer, *Memoirs of the life and writings of Robert Robinson*, 196.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 4, 426-7.
[98] Gunning, *Reminiscences*, Volume 2, 39.

Musgrave for acknowledgement of his role in connection to Robinson's abolitionist petition, though no further details are given of what this entailed.[99] Another abolitionist in the Robinson circle was William Frend. He had been a university man; he was senior wrangler (the title given to the highest-achieving undergraduate mathematician) in 1780 and soon became a fellow and tutor at Jesus college, from where he also ministered to two churches in the Cambridge area as a zealous Anglican priest.[100] However over the course of the 1780s he underwent a religious change and embraced Unitarian beliefs (the denial of the Christian doctrine of the trinity), turning as others had done before him to the cause of religious reform at the University. When unsuccessful he resigned his church roles in 1787 to dedicate himself to reformist activities, and in 1788 he lost his college tutorship after publishing an explicitly Unitarian address. It was around this time that he began to attend Robinson's sermons and developed a close friendship with him, the both of them being motivated by the same ambitions for religious reform.[101] Frend's burgeoning political radicalism and connection to Robinson soon prompted his involvement in other movements for civil and religious liberty, most significantly abolitionism in the late 1780s. In Thomas Clarkson's history of abolition Frend is recorded as having written to the Abolition Society to offer his support in 1787, and evidently this offer was taken up as the following year he met the society to bring them money raised for their cause at the University.[102] In support of this and other causes Frend was very energetic, so much so that one historian has suggested that after Robinson's death in 1790 Frend was possibly the best known and most active political radical in Cambridge.[103] One more abolitionist in Robinson's circle was William Hollick, his fellow member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Hollick was a grocer and a deacon of St Andrew's Street, his family active both in the church and in local politics. Along with his Uncle Ebenezer Senior and Cousin Ebenezer Junior, both oil merchants, William grew increasingly involved in organised Dissenter agitation for political reform in the 1780s; James Bradley's excellent study of Dissenter politics in Cambridgeshire at the time repeatedly finds the Hollick name listed in petitions, sitting on committees, and speaking on behalf of Dissenter interests.[104] William became a church deacon in 1790, and after Robinson's death in that year and Ebenezer Senior's in 1792 he provided leadership and constancy to the church in times of transition.[105] Although there are no surviving records of

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[99] Ibid, 150; Dyer, *Memoirs of the life and writings of Robert Robinson*, x.
[100] Schneider, *Wordsworth's Cambridge Education*, 137.
[101] Dyer, *Memoirs of the life and writings of Robert Robinson*, 315-8.
[102] Clarkson, *The history of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade,* Volume 1, 456; David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860* (London: Routledge, 1991), 153.
[103] Knight, *University Rebel*, 104.
[104] Bradley, *Religion and Reform at the Polls*, 69, 70 & 73.
[105] Robinson, *Church Book*, 136.

his abolitionist views in his own words, it seems unsurprising that he would have been heavily involved in the movement considering his active engagement with his radical church, and that of he and his family in Dissenter politics. Likewise, unfortunately there is no record of how precisely he and Robinson came to be members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, though I shall attempt to speculate at the end of this chapter. Lastly, another local abolitionist of note was Charles Finch, an ironmonger and a member of Robinson's congregation.[106] He was a councilman of the town whose involvement in Dissenter politics can also be traced in Bradley's study, and uniquely of any figures heresofar named was also an early supporter of the Abolition Society, appearing on their 1787 subscribers list.[107]

Musgrave, Frend, Hollick and Finch were four Cambridge abolitionists who can be clearly linked to Robinson and for whom sufficient records exist to give some indication of their lives and views. There were undoubtedly countless more however, as indicated by the strong support for abolition in the town in the late 1780s and early 1790s. University, Corporation and County all sent petitions to Parliament in 1788, of which the Corporation and County petitions were both voted unanimously (I cannot find any mention of the same for the University's, but no record of opposition to it either); additionally, Mayor Mortlock ordered the Corporation's petition to be printed in the *Cambridge Chronicle* and two London newspapers.[108] In my study of the Corporation's record books I found no other examples of the Mayor expressly requesting the publication of a petition; that he felt incentivised to do so in 1788 is potentially indicative of the local popularity of the measure. In 1792 the University sent a further abolitionist petition to Parliament as did a public meeting of Cambridge's inhabitants presided over by the mayor, which again was voted unanimously, along with votes of thanks for "Mr. Wilberforce, Mr. Pitt, Mr. Fox, Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson, for their exertions in the cause of abolition.".[109] Though by this point Robinson had died and Peckard had moved to Peterborough to take up a new clerical appointment there, both town and University remained strongly supportive of the abolitionist cause in 1792.

While Cambridge was undoubtedly a stronghold of abolition in the 1780s it is difficult to ascertain the extent of the influence carried by Robinson and its townsmen in the wider movement, especially as compared to their academic neighbours. Alumni of the University such as Clarkson, Wilberforce and Pitt played distinct roles at the political movement's head, but for those ordinary townsmen whose lives and political activities did not extend far beyond

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[106] Ibid, 125.
[107] Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, *List of the Society*, unpaginated.
[108] Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 4, 426-7; *Corporation Common Day Book*, January 21, 1788.
[109] Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 4, 442-3.

their locality it is harder to determine any influence beyond it. With the exception of Charles Finch, a town councilman, and William Frend a member of the University, they appear to have had little or no involvement with the Abolition Society. And yet, Robinson and Hollick appear alongside their illustrious abolitionist compatriots on the membership list of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. With no evidence that I have seen recording how precisely they ended up there, it is only possible to speculate as to how exactly the names of these two individuals found their way across the Atlantic. Certainly Robinson and his church were known for their political radicalism, but this was not specific to abolitionism; rather, abolition of the slave trade was one of a number of causes which called to Dissenters and liberal townsmen increasingly clamouring for religious and political reforms. As it so happens, it may be one of these other causes which does more to explain Robinson and Hollick's inclusion on the Pennsylvania list: their opposition to the American Revolutionary War and, at least in Robinson's case, outright support for American Independence. As has already been noted Robinson signed a 1775 petition calling for a conciliatory approach to unhappy colonists, and Hollick's name appears on a petition in 1780 denouncing the ongoing war.[110] More interesting however is a visit made to Robinson in 1784 by a delegation of prominent Americans including a certain General Read, referred to by Robinson as "second to Washington" and John Jay, former president of the continental congress and later first chief justice of the United States.[111] In a letter to a friend Robinson described their two-day visit in which they enthusiastically discussed "liberty, property, law, commerce, religion, and a future state of perfect and everlasting felicity", at the end of which the Americans further offered Robinson as much land in the US as he should desire to accept.[112] He never took them up on their offer, and while there is no record of how or why this visit came about, it is nevertheless evident that Robinson had won himself some firm friends in the United States. When the Pennsylvania Abolition Society was incorporated in 1789 John Jay of New York, almost certainly the same man who visited Robinson in 1784, was also on the list of members, and it is entirely possible that through this American visit Robinson and Hollick made connections with abolitionists in the United States, albeit primarily on the basis of their support for the cause of their national independence.[113]

There is little doubt that Robinson, his humble church and his allies in the town played a key role in turning Cambridge into a passionate abolitionist constituency. Other than their petitions to Parliament and their connections to the United States, there is little to suggest

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[110] Bradley, *Religion and Reform at the Polls*, 69-70.
[111] Robinson and Robinson, *Select Works*, 211-2; Robinson, *Church Book*, introduction.
[112] Robinson and Robinson, *Select Works*, 212.
[113] Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, *Constitution and act of incorporation*, 12.

that their abolitionist agitation took them far beyond their locality. They did however build for themselves a radical political reputation over the course of the 1780s, advocating abolition within a confluence of movements for civil and religious reform. As the decade progressed however this would become more controversial, as attention increasingly turned to events across the channel in France, and aspiring political reformers came under increasing scrutiny - including Robinson and his fellow Cambridge Dissenters. In a letter to a friend in 1787, Robinson makes reference to Pitt holding him up "as a son of sedition", the context of which is unclear.[114] In 1790 Edmund Burke MP singled out Robinson for criticism in a parliamentary debate in which he defended the established religious order.[115] Robinson died in that same year and did not live to see the mounting political tension reach its crescendo in the 1790s, with the accompanying government repression and abolitionist stagnation that came with it. Nevertheless his activism and influence had made Cambridge a fertile ground for new dissenting agitators to take up the torch. One such figure was radical newspaper editor and abolitionist Benjamin Flower, and in the next chapter I will explore his efforts to maintain abolitionist urgency in a decade which witnessed a reactionary turn both nationally and in the town of Cambridge.

Chapter 4: Benjamin Flower and Cambridge Abolitionism in the 1790s

The national campaign for the abolition of the slave trade appeared to have achieved some measure of victory when, in 1792, the House of Commons voted in favour of gradual abolition of the trade. This victory was short lived however as the House of Lords sought to delay implementation by insisting on hearing its own evidence, and did so successfully with abolition not coming to pass until 1807. This considerable delay was down in large part to a reactionary turn in British politics in the early 1790s, prompted particularly by revolutions abroad. The French Revolution in 1789, subsequent declaration of a republic in 1792, execution of King Louis XVI in 1793 and outbreak of war with Britain in that same year were the main drivers of this backlash. The 1792 publication of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* and the formation of radical groups such as the London Corresponding Society and the Friends of the People drew added scrutiny to proponents of political reform in Britain, who were also often abolitionists.[116] The Haitian Revolution of 1791 and subsequent conflict there created further pressure on British abolitionists, whose support for emancipation appeared to overlap with a perceived credible threat to the country's West Indian territory.[117] Opponents

[114] Robinson and Robinson, *Select Works*, 232.
[115] Turley, *The Culture of English Anti-Slavery*, 158; Knight, *University Rebel*, 88.
[116] Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 65-6.
[117] Turley, *The Culture of English Anti-Slavery*, 168.

of abolition certainly took advantage of the Haitian developments in order to renew their attacks on abolitionist leaders in the press.[118] In this increasingly charged political climate the government, led by Pitt and supported by some prominent abolitionists such as Wilberforce, adopted increasingly repressive counter-measures, clamping down on press freedoms, expanding surveillance and issuing a royal proclamation in 1792 warning of punitive action against activities deemed seditious. With possibly direct or at least tacit government support, the loyalist Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers was formed, which mustered popular agitation across the country in opposition to perceived radical and revolutionary threats.[119]

This climate of political turmoil and the debates it engendered spread to Cambridge, which also witnessed something of a local reactionary revival at this time. After the royal proclamation against sedition was published in May 1792, the University and the Corporation both voted addresses to the king to commend the measures and express their support for government policy.[120] When in July a County meeting was held for this same purpose the address was widely supported, though it is noted that Peter Musgrave and William Hollick were both present at the meeting and voiced their opposition, which was met in Musgrave's case with a mocking retort regarding his profession.[121] Unfortunately for Musgrave his voiced opposition would make him a target for the town's anti-radical elements. Throughout the remainder of 1792 Cambridge and its surrounding villages witnessed continued reactionary activity, including regular patriotic riots which targeted the homes and businesses of known Dissenters and political radicals. Musgrave's home was attacked, as was the St Andrew's Street meeting house, the church having retained its political reputation after Robinson's death with the appointment of a like-minded successor in Robert Hall in 1791.[122] This mob activity was far from spontaneous, and in fact appears to have received tacit support from many in the town and University. Gunning recorded that at this time: "An attempt was made in the University and town to represent those who differed from Mr. Pitt as enemies to the constitution. Associations were formed against Republicans and Levellers, the resolutions against them were expressed in very offensive language, and all those who declined signing them were stigmatised as enemies to their King. The Dissenters (as a body) were included in that number".[123] With this turn against Dissenters they also began to lose the political clout they had formerly wielded. Mayor Mortlock, who had previously attended meetings of the

[118] Clarkson, *The history of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade,* Volume 2, 129-30.
[119] Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People?*, 69-70.
[120] Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 4, 444-5.
[121] Ibid, 445; *Cambridge Chronicle*, July 14, 1792.
[122] Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 4, 445.
[123] Gunning, *Reminiscences*, Volume 1, 277-8.

Cambridge Constitutional Society with Robinson and held his own views on parliamentary reform, had by the early 1790s definitively reversed this approach. Loyal to the government interest, he ceased his support for his old reformer allies in local politics and used his absolute control of the Corporation to buy the cooperation of Dissenter aldermen and other advocates of reform.[124] The year 1792 closed in Cambridge with "riotous assemblies" taking place nearly every evening, concluding with an effigy of Thomas Paine being burnt in the town centre on New Year's Eve.[125]

Internally at the University of Cambridge there was also a reactionary backlash against Dissenters and reformers at this time. Gunning mentions a number of University members in his *Reminiscences* who either encouraged or generally welcomed the attacks on Dissenters in the town. These include one tutor who praised the rioters in front of his pupils, calling the unrest "A LAUDABLE EBULLITION OF JUSTIFIABLE ZEAL"; in another instance, when a mob passed Emmanuel college with the hanging effigy of a local grocer and Dissenter named Gazam, the Master of that college "laughed heartily" and gave the men carrying it five shillings with the instruction to go and shake it well outside Mr Gazam's house; another mention made by Gunning is of Sir Busick Harwood, Professor of Anatomy at the University who declared that all Dissenters should be considered rogues unless proved otherwise.[126] The grocer Gazam was one of a number of Cambridge Dissenters who fled the aggression in the town at this time and migrated to the United States. Separately to its official support for anti-sedition measures and the hostility shown by individual members towards Dissenters, the most high-profile example of the University's reactionary turn at this time was the expulsion of abolitionist and aspiring civil and religious reformer William Frend.

As has already been mentioned, Frend's adoption of Unitarian beliefs and outspoken views on these and church reform in the late 1780s had come at a cost, as he was obliged to renounce his church livings and was also removed from his tutorship position at the University. He had remained a fellow of Jesus College however from where he continued his activities, much to the chagrin of some of the defenders of the established church. In the spiralling political climate of the early 1790s he had been involved in exactly the sort of agitation which the government warned against, collaborating with allies across the country to set up local political groups and circulate radical literature.[127] When in 1793 he published an appeal for peace with France, *Peace and Union recommended to the Associated bodies of Republicans and Anti-Republicans*, Frend was judged to have crossed a line. While the

[124] Cam, "Quo Warranto Proceedings", 158 & 163.
[125] Gunning, *Reminiscences*, Volume 1, 276; Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, Volume 4, 447.
[126] Gunning, *Reminiscences*, Volume 1, 277-9.
[127] Knight, *University Rebel*, 91-2.

primary focus of his anti-war pamphlet was to criticise the war and the tax hikes accompanying it, decrying the effects of these on Britain's common people, Frend also expressed his happiness at the overthrow of the ancien regime in France, before advocating a series of religious and political reforms and attacking the Church of England.[128] While all of these sentiments were already heavily contentious in the political climate of the early 1790s, the last point attacking the very existence of the established national church was especially so at the University, with its close links to that same institution. Even the *Cambridge Chronicle*, which until the early 1790s had largely sought to report on political news rather than offer its own commentary, saw fit to publish a condemnation of the pamphlet.[129] Frend was duly charged with seeking to damage the church in the eyes of the country, of trying to damage the reputation of the colleges, and of seeking to disturb the harmony of society, and he was expelled from the University.[130] After unsuccessfully appealing the decision Frend moved to London shortly after. Frend's dismissal was largely driven by the University Vice-Chancellor of 1792 Isaac Milner, Evangelical mentor and ally of William Wilberforce. Writing to Wilberforce in 1793, Milner sought to impress on him and by extension his close friend Pitt the University's commitment to combating its perceived internal revolutionaries: "I don't believe Pitt was ever aware of how much consequence the expulsion of Frend was: it was the ruin of the Jacobinical party as a *University thing*".[131] Strong doubts have been cast on the existence of any genuine Jacobin or revolutionary group at the University, but the myth of one certainly existed, and it is possible that it was employed to crack down on figures like Frend who held not just political but religious dissenting views, while at the same time boosting the University's loyalist credentials.[132] Regardless, the event is an early example of the emerging divisions of the period between people who'd previously united behind the cause of abolition; Dissenters and reformers sympathetic to the French Revolution and narratives of universal rights, such as Frend on the one hand, and the government and its traditional supporters including Evangelicals such as Milner and Wilberforce on the other.

So it came to be that in 1793 the town and University of Cambridge had decidedly shifted in a reactionary direction, its institutions asserting loyalty to the government and approval of its crackdown on dissent. This same crackdown was felt locally as Dissenters and reformers in the town were harassed and some, like Gazam and Frend, left Cambridge whether by choice or otherwise. The abolitionist cause was on the back foot nationally after having been

[128] Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of Enlightenment*, 229-30.
[129] Murphy, "Newspapers and Opinion in Cambridge", 39.
[130] Gunning, *Reminiscences*, Volume 1, 285.
[131] Ibid, 308-9.
[132] Knight, *University Rebel*, 107-9.

thwarted in Parliament, and many of its local advocates were caught up in the wave of hostility towards proponents of reform. With Robinson dead and Peckard removed to Peterborough, the town's two leading abolitionists were both gone. However, the broader spirit of reform there was not entirely lost. Despite the high profile expulsion of Frend there remained at the University a significant undercurrent representative of or at least sympathetic to his views, as indicated by the number of undergraduates who supported him at his trial.[133] In the town itself St Andrew's Street remained a focus point for political and religious radicalism under the leadership of the new young Reverend Robert Hall. Recently arrived from Bristol, where he had played an important role in abolitionist efforts in the city, Hall had been chosen to succeed Robinson in 1791 on account of his radical political views.[134] While he did not continue his abolitionist activism in Cambridge, Hall was highly engaged in the "violent political discussion" prevalent in the town at this time, taking it beyond the town also with his publication of "two classics of Dissenting literature in the 1790s": *Christianity consistent with a love of freedom* (1791) and *An apology for the freedom of the press* (1793).[135] It was into this politically charged church and town that Benjamin Flower moved in 1793, with the objective of setting up a new liberal newspaper: the *Cambridge Intelligencer*.

Benjamin Flower was born in 1755 into a family of London Dissenters, his father a prosperous merchant and Unitarian. He did not share his father's commercial aptitude and promptly wasted his inherited share of the business after his father's death in 1778. He worked as a tutor and bank clerk for some years before becoming the European representative of a merchant house in 1785, through which he travelled the continent half the year. When this position came to an end in 1791 he was in France, and he remained in the country for a further 6 months, witnessing part of the revolution there before returning to England. It was at this point that he wrote his first political work, *The french constitution; with remarks on some of its principle articles* (1792), a significant part of which was criticism of the British political system. Following this he became the editor of the new *Cambridge Intelligencer*, set up with his brother Richard in 1793 in the belief that the provincial press could play a key role in campaigns for civil and religious liberty.[136] From the beginning this

[133] Ibid, 299-300.
[134] Whelan, Timothy, "The Revd Dr W.M.S. West: Robert Hall and the Bristol Slave-Trade Debate of 1787–1788", *Baptist Quarterly* 38, no. 5 (2000): 211-224.
[135] Whelan, "Coleridge and Robert Hall", 39; Timothy Whelan, *Politics, religion, and romance: the letters of Benjamin Flower and Eliza Gould Flower, 1794-1808* (Aberystwyth: Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, 2008), xxiv.
[136] M.J. Murphy, "Benjamin Flower and the Politics of Dissent", 77-8; Oldfield, "(Re)mapping Abolitionist Discourse", 34-5.

was his objective, to project a liberal voice in a turbulent political moment where the threat of government crackdown on those same liberties was becoming ever more credible.

Flower's political intentions made the *Cambridge Intelligencer* a unique and innovative paper. His use of political editorials was pioneering for the time, certainly among provincial newspapers which usually did little more than copy across national news from London newspapers to present alongside their local reporting.[137] As a radical political instrument it was an extremely effective one, in large part because of its status as a distinctly local newspaper. It attracted less government attention on account of its perceived local focus and circulation away from London. Additionally, unlike national newspapers the *Cambridge Intelligencer*'s circulation was not reliant on the post office, where the government exercised much of its censorship; Flower instead made use of a network of newsagents and newsmen to distribute his paper, as other country papers did.[138] This circulation network expanded rapidly. While the *Intelligencer*'s first editions show a limited distribution in the East Anglia region, by the next year it was being distributed throughout the country, and its initial circulation had quadrupled to 2700 copies a week by 1797, far in excess of the norm for provincial papers.[139] As much as his views were controversial in the general prevailing spirit of the times, his outspokenness nevertheless won him many admirers among radicals and reformers across the country. The *Cambridge Intelligencer* was favoured with advertisements from its outset by such radical groups as the Sheffield Constitutional Society, the London Society for Constitutional Information and the London Corresponding Society, and such was its popularity that Michael Murphy has suggested it became something akin to a "nation-wide congregational magazine for Rational Dissenters".[140] At the heart of the *Intelligencer*'s appeal was Flower's fierce radical politics, inspired by Robert Robinson (suggestive of Flower having some connection to Cambridge in the 1780s when Robinson was alive), and one the issues of deepest significance to him was that of abolition.[141] John Oldfied estimates that over the course of his ten-year operation of the *Intelligencer* Flower published at least thirty dedicated editorials on the subject of the slave trade, in addition to others attacking the trade alongside other issues, or commenting on related subjects such as the Maroon Wars.[142] Compared with his abolitionist predecessors in Cambridge, this frequency of abolitionist agitation arguably makes Flower the town's most vocal abolitionist

[137] Murphy, "Newspapers and Opinion in Cambridge", 40.
[138] John Feather, "Cross-channel currents: historical bibliography and *l'histoire du livre*", *The Library* 2, no. 1 (1980): p. 13.
[139] Ibid; Murphy, "Newspapers and Opinion in Cambridge" 41.
[140] Murphy, "Newspapers and Opinion in Cambridge", 40-1; Murphy, "Benjamin Flower and the Politics of Dissent", 80.
[141] Whelan, *Politics, religion, and romance*, xxiv.
[142] John Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution : An International History of Anti-Slavery, C.1787–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 131-2.

of the period, despite only having been active in the decade after 1793 - a time generally considered a period of abolitionist retrenchment at the national level.

Flower's thoughts on the slave trade were evident from the outset of his engagement with politics. In *The french constitution* he castigated the British government for the fact that it did not adequately represent the views and wishes of the British people, one example of this deficit being Parliament's lax approach to the abolition of the slave trade. The trade itself Flower decried as utterly unjustifiable in light of all the evidence presented on it, lamenting: "we ought to be ashamed of the name of Britons, as long as we continue a traffick the most wicked and infernal that ever disgraced the human race".[143] Like Peckard and Robinson before him Flower felt a sense of communal, national culpability for the ills of the trade, but he also indicated in this early text that he perceived the solution to be a communal one as well. In his conclusion to the book he commends his fellow countrymen for their "manly and virtuous sentiments" in demanding "with one voice" the abolition of the reprehensible trade; he further appeals for them to tackle other issues with the same fervour and perseverance, promising that should they do so "no minister, however unprincipled or hypocritical, no House of Lords or Commons, however lost to all sense of dignity or virtue, can long resist your demands".[144] Perhaps disillusioned, later that year Flower published the second edition of his book, this time with an added appendix dedicated to the slave trade following the nominal victory in the House of Commons for gradual abolition by 1796. Flower was incensed by the result, chastising the government for sanctioning "the continuance of a system of robbery, plunder, rapine, kidnapping, and murder", and reserving particularly vehement criticism for the bishops and other members of the House of Lords who did the most to frustrate popular will.[145] Infuriated by the government's disregard for the hundreds of petitions sent in support of abolition, Flower turned to advocating a new tactic, boycotting sugar, convinced that the only way to make the political class listen was by harming their interests. He recommended to his readers recent pamphlets advocating a boycott, and made a particular call for British women to lead its implementation, warning them of the social judgement that would arise from "sweetening their tea with the blood of their fellow creatures".[146] Flower clearly believed that popular pressure, underpinned by widespread and

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[143] Benjamin Flower, *The french constitution; with remarks on some of its principal articles; in which their Inportance in a Political, Moral and Religious Point of View, is Illustrated; and the Necessity of A Reformation in Church and State in Great Britain, Enforced. By Benjamin Flower* (London, 1792), 214-7.
[144] Ibid, 497-8.
[145] Benjamin Flower, *The french constitution; with remarks on some of its principal articles; in which their importance in a political, moral and religious point of view, is illustrated; and the Necessity of A Reformation in Church and State in Great Britain, Enforced. By Benjamin Flower*, Second Edition (London, 1792), 449-51.
[146] Ibid, 452-3.

genuine support for abolition, could affect it and the other political changes he advocated in 1792.

When Flower started the *Cambridge Intelligencer* the following year his engagement with local networks of political activism was immediately apparent, his second issue (I have not been able to access a copy of the first) carrying on the front page adverts for Frend's *Peace and Union Recommended* and Hall's *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, alongside one for his own *The french constitution*, its appendix on the slave trade declared prominently.[147] Four weeks later came his first personal mention of the slave trade in the publication, as part of a news roundup of American and French affairs in which he highlights the British Government's hypocrisy for criticising bloodshed in France while the slave trade, which "murders FOURTEEN THOUSAND of our innocent fellow-creatures annually", remained sanctioned by Britain.[148] British hypocrisy would remain a persistent feature of his criticism throughout his time in Cambridge, often with regards to subjects relating to France, peace with which Flower was also a regular advocate of.[149] While this criticism was applied to anyone who professed Christianity or a love of freedom while remaining ambivalent towards or supportive of the slave trade, two of the most frequent targets of Flower's ire were Prime Minister William Pitt, who remained one of Cambridge's University MPs, and William Wilberforce.

Flower's criticism of Pitt is unsurprising, considering his leadership of a government so hostile to reform and bent on stifling its advocates. However the particular, frequent hostility shown by Flower hinged on what he considered the Prime Minister's reversal on matters of political reform and on the slave trade. At the time of writing *The french constitution* Flower's criticism was largely suggestive, sarcastically referring to Pitt with his own emphasis as a "*professed* friend to the abolition".[150] By the time of the *Intelligencer*'s first issues however this view had progressed, Flower denouncing the Prime Minister's "apostasy from his former sentiments".[151] This would be a theme that Flower returned to repeatedly over the 1790s, as did other active Cambridge reformers like Robert Hall who considered Pitt a "shameless apostate" of reform, a "veteran in frauds while in the bloom of youth, betraying first, and then persecuting, his earliest friends and connexions".[152] For Flower, Hall and other Cambridge reformers and abolitionists there was a palpable feeling of betrayal in the fact that their

[147] *Cambridge Intelligencer*, July 27, 1793.
[148] *Cambridge Intelligencer*, August 17, 1793.
[149] Oldfield, "(Re)mapping Abolitionist Discourse", 34.
[150] Flower, *The french constitution*, 451.
[151] *Cambridge Intelligencer*, August 10, 1793.
[152] Whelan, "Coleridge and Robert Hall", 43.

University MP appeared to have not just betrayed his early principles, but now pursued a campaign against its advocates. For many of them who, like Flower and Frend, the French Revolution had spurred hope for the prospect of radical political reform, Pitt's government was doubly wounding for the single minded determination with which it pursued war against the young republic. For Flower this matter overlapped with abolitionism not just because it sapped at the country's resources and attention over more worthy causes, or because it accentuated the hypocrisy of the slave trade's continued bloodshed, but because he deemed it a war pursued in the slavers' interests, on one occasion referring to the brazen support it received from, among others, "the Liverpool Slave Traders".[153]

Pursuant to the intense criticism Flower directed at Pitt were his similar feelings towards William Wilberforce, which veered from disappointment at best to disdain at worst. Like Pitt, Flower considered Wilberforce something of a hypocrite for the contradictions he perceived between Wilberforce's support for Pitt's repression on the one hand, and his support for emancipation of the enslaved and his avowed piety on the other. Flower commented in the *Intelligencer* in 1794 "we beg leave to remark that Mr. Wilberforce is a gentleman who makes extraordinary pretensions to piety, and classes himself amongst a set of Christians who term themselves evangelical, but whose evangelical principles have lately made them some of the warmest supporters of war abroad, and of corruption and bigotry at home".[154] Flower himself was both deeply political and deeply religious, and as Pitt's deemed apostasy on political principles drew his ire then so did his perception of Wilberforce's misplaced claims to piety. He attributed Wilberforce's failings to his closeness to Pitt, commenting in 1797 that their relationship offered a "lesson" to others on the manner by which early friendship can cloud judgement.[155] Such was his perceived allegiance to Pitt that Flower even suggested it trumped his abolitionist credentials, asking wryly in 1798: "Is Mr. Wilberforce prepared to vindicate this, as he has almost every other diabolical measure of his Right Hon. Friend? If so, every real friend to virtue and religion must conclude, that his *sincerity* respecting the abolition of the SLAVE TRADE, is of a piece with his *sincerity* respecting VITAL CHRISTIANITY".[156] Evidently Flower had an extremely low opinion of Wilberforce's sincerity on both fronts. Nevertheless he diligently reported on the annual parliamentary efforts to abolish the trade, though as the years without success went on he took an increasingly unimpressed view of these. By 1799 he described the parliamentary procedure over the bill of that year as a "tragi-comedy", a bill "similar to that of last year" which sought to limit the trade "to some trifling degree", drily predicting that it would fail after uninspiring debate

[153] Murphy, "Benjamin Flower and the Politics of Dissent", 81.
[154] *Cambridge Intelligencer*, January 18, 1794.
[155] *Cambridge Intelligencer*, April 15, 1797.
[156] *Cambridge Intelligencer*, January 27, 1798.

between “lukewarm friends” and “determined opponents”.[157] Effectively, by this point, he considered the annual bills as little more than a show. Yet he continued to report on them, with frequent references to the gradual abolition act of 1792 and the petitioning campaigns of that year and the late 1780s. With these reminders and the annual reports on Wilberforce’s bills, he sought to keep the slave trade in the public eye, though in the same issue of 1799 he pessimistically commented that the nation was “too much engaged, fighting for religion, to attend to the subject”.[158] While Flower’s early positive vision of an irresistible popular swell of activism had by this point diminished, he maintained throughout the 1790s his advocacy for boycotting sugar, certain that this was the most effective way to bring about abolition.[159]

Alongside his sense of communal culpability, his bitter criticism of national and individual hypocrisy and his attempts to encourage the boycotting of sugar, Flower’s abolitionism was also defined by its frequent invocations of imminent national ruin as punishment for national sins. Often, this was argued with regards to occasions of slave resistance and conflicts in the Carribean, which was another way in which Flower’s abolitionism parallels that of Peckard and Robinson in Cambridge before him. Commenting on the ongoing British invasion of San Domingo in 1795, Flower said: “Calamities thicken in the West Indies, and till the infernal SLAVE TRADE is abolished, we can hardly wish them to cease. Desperate disorders require desperate remedies.”.[160] For Flower revolution and resistance to oppression was entirely logical and justified, a common right whether applied to the African enslaved, the French or indeed the Irish. Flower also advocated religious toleration for Catholics, and when the Irish Rebellion of 1798 broke out he asserted that in light of the “severe” recent system of rule in Ireland such consequences had always been predicted.[161] Over the 1790s Flower’s attitude towards slave resistance became ever more welcoming. After a near insurrection in Jamaica in 1800 he commented “We shall only observe on this subject that while those blood suckers, West India Planters, and their co-adjutors the flesh dealers continue their traffick… while EIGHTY THOUSAND of our fellow-creatures are annually murdered or enslaved, we shall not be surprised, and, we will add, we shall scarcely regret any event, that may tend to the annihilation of so infernal a system”.[162] A year later he wrote in the *Intelligencer* that he hoped to see the West Indies “completely revolutionised”, and for the “Almighty Avenger” to empower the oppressed to “break their chains over the heads of their oppressors”.[163] For

[157] *Cambridge Intelligencer*, April 13, 1799.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Oldfield, “(Re)mapping Abolitionist Discourse”, 41-2.
[160] *Cambridge Intelligencer*, August 1, 1795.
[161] *Cambridge Intelligencer*, June 2, 1798.
[162] *Cambridge Intelligencer*, February 15, 1800.
[163] Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism*, 133.

Flower, slave resistance was not just the logical human response to oppression, but the vehicle through which a punitive, avenging Christian God would put their injustice to right.

Throughout the 1790s Flower relentlessly attacked the slave trade and the politicians he blamed for its continuation, and until 1799 he avoided persecution under Pitt's sedition laws. Before then he had been targeted by some local reactionaries; on one occasion, after a County meeting advocating peace with France in 1797, Flower and other local reformers including William Hollick had been attacked by members of a patriotic mob who smashed the windows of his house, Robert Hall allegedly standing guard outside.[164] It was in 1799 however, the week after Flower's pessimistic commentary on the state of Parliament's abolition bills, that the axe finally fell. Flower was prosecuted for a critique of Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff and Regius Professor of Divinity at the University, one of its oldest and most prestigious positions. Watson, like many other of Flower's targets, was accused of hypocrisy; he had been an early advocate of reform and of abolition, but by the late 1790s was toeing the government line and had amassed considerable wealth, which Flower deemed his greater priority. In Flower's words: "For sometime he was an opposer of the minister: finding that was not the way to preferment, he suddenly became an alarmist… the Right Reverend apostate and time server".[165] Convicted by the House of Lords for libel Flower was fined £100 and imprisoned for 6 months, and although he managed to continue running the *Intelligencer* from his cell, the affair nevertheless did him damage. He and his wife became more cautious, the paper's revenues were beginning to diminish (in part thanks to an additional tax imposed on newspapers by Pitt in 1797), and circulation dropped in the early 1800s, possibly also impacted by competition from a new national opposition paper.[166] Flower was also by this point slightly more isolated in Cambridge, having fallen out with Robert Hall and left St Andrew's Street over Hall's increasing prioritisation of tackling Infidelity (in eighteenth century usage referring to a lack of religious faith) over political issues.[167] In 1803 the *Intelligencer* ceased production and Flower moved out of Cambridge shortly after.

Reflecting on Flower's decade of abolitionist and other political activism in Cambridge it is difficult to gage his level of impact. Unlike Peckard and Robinson whose work took place in a decade of abolitionist upswing, Flower was perpetually a rebel, fighting as much against individuals who would in other circumstances have been allies as he was fighting against the trade itself. His activism was on the margins, the national movement which Peckard and

[164] Whelan, *Coleridge and Robert Hall*, 45.
[165] *Cambridge Intelligencer*, April 20, 1799.
[166] Oldfield, "(Re)mapping Abolitionist Discourse", 42-3.
[167] Whelan, *Politics, religion, and romance*, 374.

Robinson had been a part of lying dormant while in Parliament fairly futile efforts took place each year to press a question which, as Flower himself noted, was very much low on the list of national priorities in a time of war, economic crisis and government-led hostility towards proponents of reform. Yet Flower's example is evidence that the cause of reform and of abolition was not as dead as histories of this lost decade would often suggest. His efforts to uphold the urgency of abolishing the slave trade, broadcasted in a provincial newspaper to a disproportionately popular nationwide readership, demonstrate that the cause of abolition remained on the minds of many despite the movement having been gutted by repression and disillusioned apathy. The *Intelligencer*'s criticism of Pitt, Wilberforce and others is also revealing of the divided dynamics of abolitionism at this time. While it is impossible to determine the extent of its contribution to the eventual abolition of the slave trade in 1807 - though Oldfield suggests it successfully nurtured an abolitionist culture which fed into that moment - Cambridge's radical newspaper nevertheless merits inclusion in abolitionist histories for the insight it sheds on an otherwise largely dormant decade.[168]

Conclusion

After the *Cambridge Intelligencer* ceased publication there was no further organised, outspoken abolitionist activism from Cambridge before 1807, though doubtless there remained many there who harboured abolitionist tendencies. While the town had no direct involvement in the successful parliamentary abolition of the trade in 1807, Pitt having died in 1806 and no petitions being sent from Cambridge in the buildup to the event, there are indications that the cause remained an important one for people there. In the 1806 University election which took place to vote for Pitt's successor as MP, the perceived degree of genuine support for abolishing the slave trade appears to have played a role in the results. During the campaign it was revealed that one candidate's MP father had voted against abolition in the early 1790s, and despite the frantic efforts of the son to demonstrate that he thought differently he nevertheless ended up bottom of the poll by association.[169] Yet this aside I have found little to suggest that abolitionism in Cambridge was as distinct or organised as it had been from 1781-1803.

At the outset of this thesis its objectives were to identify Cambridge's local abolitionist activity, determine the extent to which it was distinct and whether it was a connected, continuous movement, and consider where its example fits in histories of abolition. Its focus

[168] Oldfield, "(Re)mapping Abolitionist Discourse", 43.
[169] Searby, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, 421-2; Kenneth Bourne, *Palmerston, the early years, 1784-1841* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 59-61.

has been explicitly on local abolitionism, that is the movement as it was distinctly of and for the people of the town. Peckard, Robinson and Flower, alongside many of their allies within Cambridge, kept the town as their focus. Their sermons were delivered to Cambridge audiences, their publications printed and distributed there, and they were each embedded in their locality and its networks. Yet, for local actors, they each had an outsized voice and influence in abolitionist debates: whether through Peckard's role in inspiring Clarkson's catalytic involvement in the national abolitionist movement; Robinson's transformation of a small church into a huge, politically radical congregation represented in the membership list of the United States' oldest abolitionist society; or Flower's radical provincial newspaper which reached a national audience and provided an often isolated but nevertheless urgent abolitionist message in a decade where the cause largely lapsed. For these reasons Cambridge is a fascinating case study of local abolitionism, and one which merits inclusion in histories of the movement.

Reviewing this study with regards to its three stated objectives, beginning with that of identifying Cambridge abolitionism, one can clearly conclude that the cause was a prominent one in the town throughout this period. Peter Peckard, inspired by the writings of black abolitionists and driven by his religious principle of universal benevolence, set out an early, passionate case for the natural equality and right to liberty of all humankind, which the slave trade was an abject violation of. His powerful sermons and influence as Master of Magdalene College and later Vice-Chancellor of the University inspired many, most of all Thomas Clarkson whose life of abolitionist activism began with Peckard's sermon of 1784 and the essay question he set the following year. Peckard spent ten years in Cambridge, and during this time he provided vital theological and anti-racist arguments in support of abolition, and no doubt played a considerable role in transforming the University into what Jirik has rightly called the fourth outpost of the national abolitionist network of the 1780s.[170] Robert Robinson, whose decades of leadership transformed St Andrew's Street Baptist Church into a flourishing hub for religious heterodoxy and political radicalism, was at the heart of Cambridge abolitionist activism outside of the University. His creation of the Cambridge Constitutional Society provided a structure for Cambridge activists to come together in a confluence of causes which were all underpinned by shared desires for civil and religious liberty. His preaching against the slave trade was heard and disseminated by hundreds of ordinary working people, he played a key role in Cambridge's contribution to the petitioning campaign of 1788, and such was his political zeal that he and one of his ordinary parishioners became members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, a unique achievement

[170] Jirik, "Beyond Clarkson", 750.

for two individuals whose lives rarely extended beyond Cambridgeshire otherwise. Lastly, Cambridge was chosen to be the base from which radical political resistance and abolitionist appeals could be circulated in the *Cambridge Intelligencer*, which led by Benjamin Flower was a vital organ of resistance in the repressive decade of the 1790s. Flower's outspoken abolitionism featured in his newspaper with extraordinary frequency, and his views won him an audience which extended far beyond Cambridge in a unique example of a local newspaper going national. While he, and the abolitionist cause more generally, remained on the back foot throughout his years of activity, his efforts to maintain the urgency of abolition and hold British Parliamentarians to account are an important reminder that abolitionist agitation was not limited to Wilberforce's parliamentary efforts at this time.

The question of whether Cambridge abolitionism can be constituted as a local movement, with locally distinct views and methods is a more complex one. Reflecting on the findings of this study, Cambridge abolitionism was not a singular local movement made up of the sum of the town's abolitionists. There is, firstly, a distinction to be drawn between the abolitionists of the University, namely Peckard, and the abolitionists of the town centred in the 1780s around Robinson. While the two men would inevitably have known of, or even known each other, their activity largely took place in separate spheres, and the network which emerged around Robinson in particular was distinct. Centred around his church and overlapping considerably with other causes of reform, it encompassed a broad spectrum of people and causes which contrast with Peckard's largely individual activism. Flower upon his arrival also attached himself to St Andrew's Street and the networks surrounding it, though he would later break away from that grouping after falling out with Robinson's successor Robert Hall. But the abolitionism of his *Intelligencer* also is distinct for the fact that it operated independently of a local or national abolitionist movement in the disillusioned and repressive era of the 1790s.

Considering the second part of the question of distinctiveness however, I believe an argument can be made for some elements of continuity between Cambridge's overlapping abolitionist agitators with regards to the nature of their views. The four precepts set out by Peckard in his 1788 pamphlet to Parliament - the Rights of Man, the Civil Constitution, the real Honour of the Country, and the Christian Religion - were ones which can be said to define each of Cambridge's three leading abolitionist agitators. Each was firmly wedded to the notion of natural, inalienable rights, whether to general liberty and equality in Peckard's case or, in the case of Robinson and Flower, to that of political and religious liberty in particular. Britain's civil constitution and honour were also extremely significant for each abolitionist, each considering the constitution to be grounded in the right to liberty, which violated by the slave trade produced a stain on the country's honour. Recurrent in each of

their arguments are notions of national culpability and national shame, and each likewise saw abolition as something that could be brought about by a popular, communal movement which they sought to encourage. The Christian Religion was also essential to all three, Peckard and Robinson being clergymen, and even Flower holding religious services in his home and evangelising in nearby villages after leaving St Andrew's Street.[171]

This brand of abolitionism with its overlap of natural rights, ideas of constitutional liberty and communal Christian obligations is in my mind partly a product of the Cambridge setting of its advocates. The town was home to a significant minority of religious Dissenters who believed passionately in religious liberty and the necessity of civil liberty to guarantee it. The University, while a stronghold of establishment Christianity with its rigid restrictions on the right of dissenting Christians to graduate or disseminate their views, engendered a counter movement of students and members who sought to liberalise these religious rules. The vocabulary in both settings was one which brought civil and religious liberties into dialogue, and this vocabulary lent itself well to abolition when the cause began to gain traction in the 1780s. Likewise, the existing reformer networks, especially those of Dissenters, were an existing structure within which abolitionists in the town mobilised and spread their views effectively. In brief, Cambridge's undercurrent of reformist thinking paved the way for a distinct brand of abolitionism to emerge which can be neatly demarcated by Peckard's precepts, and the existing networks of this reformist undercurrent enabled the town and University to advocate abolition with remarkable unanimity in the late 1780s and early 1790s. It is telling that when this unanimity then faltered it was not due to differences on the subject of abolition, but rather on some of the questions of religious and civil liberty which had given rise to the town's reformist undercurrent in the first place.

Turning to the final question of what the Cambridge case study contributes to abolitionist histories, one can only conclude that it deserves a place. Historians such as Jirik, Hyam, Murphy and Oldfield have explored the roles of Peckard and Flower, but none of these have sought to establish that continuity which this thesis demonstrates between not only their views but those of Cambridge's other abolitionists of the late eighteenth century, chief among them Robertson.[172] As shown, Cambridge was a distinct abolitionist setting for the manner in which abolitionism in the town overlapped with and was significantly driven by other movements for civil and religious liberty. Anthony Page has convincingly written on the importance of recovering the role of Rational Dissenters in the campaign to abolish the slave

[171] Robinson, Church Book, 148-9.
[172] Jirik, "Beyond Clarkson"; Hyam, "Peter Peckard"; Murphy, "Benjamin Flower and the Politics of Dissent"; Oldfield, "(Re)mapping Abolitionist Discourse".

trade, and Roger Anstey, Christine Bolt, Seymour Drescher and others have explored the confluence of movements for religious toleration, parliamentary reform and the abolition of the slave trade.[173] While Rational Dissenters operated across the country and many advocates of different causes did indeed come together, arguably few constituencies were so defined by these phenomena as Cambridge was, for its sizeable Dissenter presence and for the unique reformist undercurrents incipient to the traditional religious setting of its dominant institution, the University. Future historians of these movements could utilise Cambridge effectively as a case study for investigating the dynamics of religious dissent and reformer confluence, in greater detail than I have been able to accord in my survey of abolitionism in the locality as a whole. Furthermore, this history of abolitionist activism from advocates for religious toleration points to the significance of religion in the British campaign to abolish the slave trade. While religion has for a long time been a focus of traditional abolitionist historiography, so dominant before the intervention of Eric Williams, CLR James and others, the example of Cambridge indicates that it was indeed a key factor for many individual abolitionists - just not the established religion of the traditionally revered Clapham Sect.[174] While this thesis has reflected its provincial, patriarchal subject setting with a disproportionate focus on the views and activities of English men, it nevertheless offers useful insights for historians of slave resistance in the abolition of the slave trade, as each of the abolitionists investigated here accorded significant weight to slave resistance in their own arguments in support of abolition. Peckard fiercely argued for racial equality and invoked the prospect of armed resistance in the West Indies, Robinson cautioned that the enslaved leading in the overthrow of slavery would be the deserved, inevitable consequence of its continuation, and Flower openly wished for slave revolutions, seeing resistance in the West Indies through the same prism as resistance to tyranny in Ireland, France or anywhere else. As demonstrated in the bicentennial celebrations of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007, popular present day narratives of abolition continue to assign disproportionate significance to the Clapham Sect and their activities in and around the British Parliament. Cambridge's example not only draws attention to the role of protestant religious minorities and provincial localities in the abolition movement, but demonstrates that the significance of slave resistance in bringing about abolition was a factor in the British movement, acknowledged by its participants in the late eighteenth century.

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[173] Anthony Page, "RATIONAL DISSENT, ENLIGHTENMENT, AND ABOLITION OF THE BRITISH SLAVE TRADE", *The Historical Journal* 54, no. 3 (2011): 741–72; Anstey et al, *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform*.

[174] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944); CLR James, *The black Jacobins : Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938).

Turning from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first, the example of Cambridge's historical abolitionists can represent a positive legacy of activism for the city's students and other residents to reflect on today. The current *Legacies of Enslavement* project is undertaking an essential investigation into how the University's scholarship from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries reinforced and validated the development of racist ideas. The distinct anti-racist arguments of Peter Peckard could be an interesting factor to bring into dialogue with this subject, offering an insight into how some members of the University argued against the development of racist thinking as well. Yet the broader picture of Cambridge's late eighteenth century abolitionism is also a reminder not to lionise its protagonists. Many of these abolitionists were not simple humanitarians but rather individuals pursuing their own objectives, for whom opposition to the slave trade was grounded in broader movements in defence of their own civil and religious liberties first and foremost. Some were motivated by idealistic notions of British and Christian values which were in their own way conducive to ideas of supremacy; some, such as Robert Robinson, further perceived abolition as a means to improve national commerce and influence. All, ultimately, were the products of their time and environment. Cambridge as a case study of late eighteenth century abolitionism demonstrates how one such time and environment produced an influential cohort of abolitionists whose engagement with this global cause was distinctly shaped by their local setting. Activists engaged in dismantling the malign legacies of slavery and empire today can take encouragement from their historical predecessors whose local efforts, in a small town on the periphery of power, nevertheless had an outsized influence on the debates and movements of their time.

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