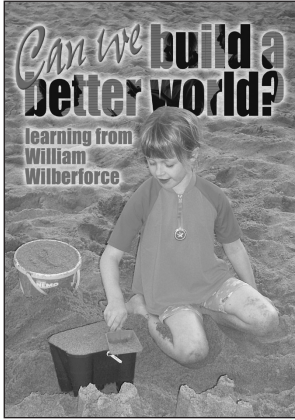


# SESSION 1



## SLAVERY: then and now

In 1800 there were an estimated 800,000 negro slaves in Spanish America and about 300,000 in Jamaica... From West Africa the volume of trade was enormous and, as is well-known, the conditions under which the slaves were shipped across the Atlantic were appalling.

Peter Hinchcliff

In 1807, after lengthy and fierce debate, the British Parliament passed an Act abolishing the slave trade. Two hundred years later we celebrate the life, vision and work of the Christian politician who drove this measure through in the face of strong opposition. It is appropriate that *York Courses* should produce a course built around his achievements, for William Wilberforce was a great Yorkshireman. He attended school in Pocklington, near York. In 1780 he was elected MP for Hull (now in the York Diocese) and in 1784 he became MP for Yorkshire itself.

This course uses the vision and achievements of Wilberforce as a springboard, but it is not a history lesson. Our concern will be to consider the implications of the faith which motivated him *then*, for our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ *today*.

As we seek to build a better world, what can we learn from the principles which guided him and the vision which inspired him? This is the vital question we shall pursue.

### The slave trade then

In eighteenth century Britain cheap labour – slave labour – was an accepted and important part of the economic landscape. A great deal depended on it and it was justified on various grounds.

- *The economy depends on it.* Many people assumed that the British economy simply could not flourish without the slave trade. We needed slaves – so what was the point of debate?
- *Greed.* If fortunes were there to be made at other people's expense, so much the worse for other people.
- *Inertia.* When attitudes and actions are both profitable and deeply embedded, the vision and energy required for radical change are immense.
- *They are different from us.* As a child I visited Kew Gardens where I saw an exhibition of 'native workers' on a plantation. I recall feeling worried about the long hours and terrible conditions, but a well-meaning adult told me that 'the natives don't feel things like we do.' The implication was that they were somehow less human than we are. I can't recall who said this, but I suspect he believed his own propaganda. I do recall that it quietened my fears just a bit – and left me wondering if it were true.

These attitudes and beliefs played an important role in persuading ordinary decent Britons that slavery was necessary and tolerable. They were buttressed by other 'bluff arguments which had a certain cogency – it saved