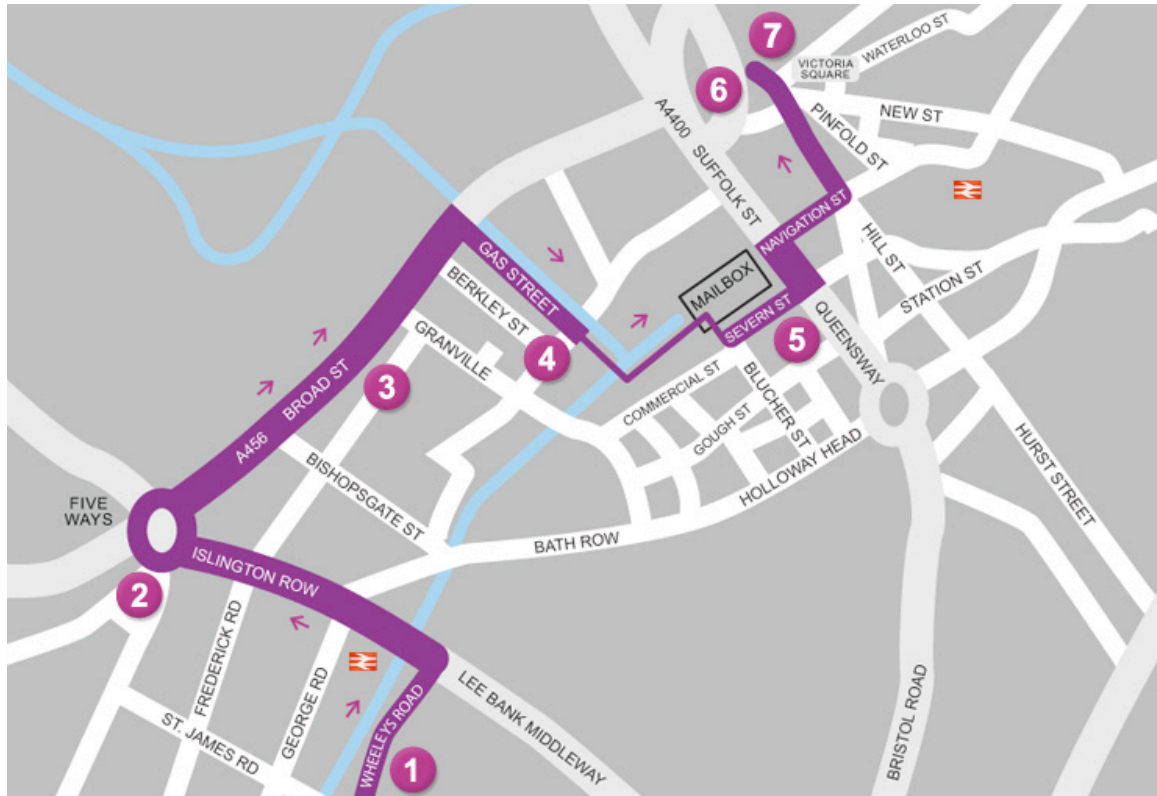


CONNECTINGHISTORIES

City Trail

The Joseph Sturge Trail



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Start at Five Ways railway station on Islington Row

If you wish to visit the site of Sturge's home, take first right outside Five Ways station and go down Wheeley's Road as far as the 'Edencroft' flats. These are at the crossing of Wheeley's Road and St James. It is here where Sturge's house once stood. In 2007, a plaque will be dedicated here to mark his life.

1. Sturge and Edgbaston

Joseph Sturge (1793-1859) was one of Birmingham's greatest antislavery campaigners. Originally born in Gloucester, Sturge relocated to Edgbaston in 1822. His house (no longer standing) was at 64 Wheelley's Road.

He lived at this address from 1824 until his death in 1859, dedicating time and money to charities, abolitionist movements and other social reforms. His home was visited by antislavery activists from around the world, including Harriet Beecher Stowe author of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'.

Sturge's interest in Birmingham was crucial to the growth of the city. One friend commented how: "his energy was so untiring that he never stopped to examine the difficulties of any undertaking which commended itself to his consciousness... I have often thought that a few thousand such men would effect a moral revolution in the world" (Stephen Hobhouse, Joseph Sturge, His Life and Work, 1919).

To visit the Sturge statue, turn left out of Five Ways station. Take the subway into the Five Ways roundabout. Take left hand exit, 'Harborne Walkway' to Marriot Hotel.

2. The Sturge Statue At Five Ways

A statue of Sturge was unveiled in 1862 at Five Ways. It stands outside the Marriot hotel, and provides important information on Sturge's aims and beliefs. Having been neglected for many years, the statue will be restored and reopened in 2007, a date marking 200 years since the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807.

Carved into stone around the statue are the words 'Peace', 'Temperance' and 'Charity'. Two symbolic angel figures stand guard, one holding a laurel leaf, the other reaching towards the figure of a child, indicating a young slave. A further inscription reads: 'He laboured to bring freedom to the negro slave, the vote to the British workman, and the promise of peace to a war worn world'. This recognises his involvement in Chartism, Antislavery and his attempts to halt international conflicts, such as the Crimean War.

Before the large audience that gathered to see the statue unveiled in 1862, a speech was read stating, "he was a distinguished actor in the work of negro emancipation, in the reclamation of juvenile offenders, in the cause of education, and in numberless other ways he sought to heal the wounds that sin had made in the framework of society."

Go back through subway. Keep to the left of stainless steel sculpture in concourse. Exit by Broad Street Walkway for Broad St (North Side). Head down to the city centre. Stop nearby the 'Old Orleans' building. Now locate the 'China Red' restaurant. Near this spot once stood a warehouse of 'J & C Sturge'.

3. Sturge's Business on Broad Street

Sturge, like many philanthropists of the 19th century, had to earn his living through business. His trade, along with his brother Charles, was that of 'Corn Merchant'. White's Directory of Birmingham (1855) tells us that the address of his warehouse offices was not far from his home: 'Sturge, Joseph & Chas, 194 Broad Street, Islington.'

It was often difficult for Sturge to balance 'morality' and 'profits'. It was for this reason his business refused to supply grain to be used for the production of alcohol in 1844. Later, in 1857, Sturge also established a 'free labour' plantation on the island of Montserrat to prove slavery was not needed to create wealth. A Birmingham owned 'Montserrat Company' operated until the 20th century.

Head off Broad Street onto Gas Street (the turning is opposite the pub called 'The Brasshouse'). Go through the archway on the left onto the canal. Continue to walk onward towards the Mailbox building.

4. Birmingham, Industry and Slavery

Built in the late 18th century, the Gas Street Basin is the meeting place of the Birmingham Main Line and the Worcester and Birmingham canals. These canals allowed the town to import and export a huge variety of metals and goods.

At this period, the transatlantic slave trade had reached its peak. Selling guns, chains and other products (often transported by canal) as was just one way in which Birmingham's economy heavily relied on slavery.

In response to the continuing transatlantic slave trade, Joseph Sturge helped to form 'The Birmingham Antislavery Society' in 1826. This campaign group worked alongside 'The Birmingham Ladies Society For The Relief of Negro Slaves' and a number of black abolitionists who visited Birmingham, such as Frederick Douglass (who gave a speech here in 1846).

Whilst some critics argued slavery abroad was needed to support jobs at home, these activists argued slavery was morally indefensible. Sturge refused all products connected with slave labour.

Head over the bridge into the Mailbox centre. Pass down the first set of escalators. Now leave through the side exit on the right hand side. This brings you out onto the corner of Severn Street.

5. 'First Day Schools'

Throughout his life, Sturge's passion for antislavery campaigning was always linked to the need for social changes at home. Widening education was a priority. Therefore, in 1845, Sturge helped begin the Quaker led 'Severn Street First Day Schools' for those who could not afford an education. Volunteer teachers provided Sunday school lessons for both younger pupils and older working class men. The building where the classes were originally held is now being redeveloped. At the top of the building is a sign which states 'British School'.

Later, a women's class was also established, and the pattern established by the Severn Street Schools spread out into other Birmingham districts. Other 'first day' schools were established in areas such as Floodgate Street, Bournville, Northfield and Selly Oak. The Severn Street Schools continued into the 20th century, setting an important precedent for educational reform.

Walk down the hill to the front of the mailbox building. Head under the colourful underpass. Walk past the angular signal box to the large crossing. Now go up Hill Street (on the left) until you come to Victoria Square, to the site of the Town Hall.

6. Sturge's Antislavery Speeches

Birmingham Town Hall has played a vital role in campaigns for social justice. This site became a prominent stage for a whole range of Sturge's different social causes. He gave many speeches here on behalf of the 'Birmingham Anti-Slavery Society', compelling his audience to understand that slavery was not a 'foreign' issue, but a moral problem which confronted everyone.

Sturge also held meetings at the Town Hall for 'The Complete Suffrage Union' (a non-violent 'chartist' group in favour of the working class vote) and for the Birmingham Temperance Society, (an anti-drinking organisation).

One particularly significant meeting at Town Hall took place on August 1st, 1838. This date marked the end of the apprentice system in the West Indies, a campaign which had become personally associated with Sturge. To mark the occasion, he led a march of schoolchildren from Town Hall to Heneage Street, where he laid a foundation stone for the Negro Emancipation Schools.

Enter the Art Gallery from Chamberlain Square. It features a Sturge portrait in gallery 22. Note: Gallery 33 also features an exhibit on the city diversity and connections to the slave trade. Go to www.bmag.org.uk for opening times.

7. The Sturge Portrait

Birmingham Art Gallery contains one of the few known oil paintings of Sturge. He is represented against a West Indies landscape; the artist of the portrait is as yet unidentified. The complex painting highlights Sturge's identity as an antislavery campaigner, and is thought to commemorate the 1838 abolition of the 'apprenticeship' in the colonies.

Being a lifelong devoted Quaker undoubtedly had a profound affect on Sturge's antislavery and humanitarian stance. He was buried in 1859 at the Bull Street Meeting House. He now rests at Lodge Hill cemetery, Selly Oak.

Exploring Joseph Sturge's life today can open up many different perspectives on Birmingham's social history. It allows us to reconsider the city's long history of positive social engagement, alongside its more complex and contradictory attitudes towards justice, race, and freedom.

The year 2007 marks the two hundred year anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in the British Colonies. Sturge would argue that rather than 'celebrating' this date, we should use it to mark an ongoing commitment to social justice in Birmingham and around the world. An evangelical figure of national stature, Joseph Sturge should be remembered as a founding father of Birmingham's social conscience.

This is the end of the Joseph Sturge trail

Compiled by Dr A. Green, 2006

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