

SANKOFA WALK REPORT

Introduction

It is very difficult to summarise a 40 day experience such as this journey was with the great variety of experiences we have all been through. Rather than report the whole thing sequentially, I shall begin with the basic framework and then pick out highlights of different aspects of what the journey was about.

The Basic Framework

The basic framework of our journey was triangular with 3 stages (London – Bristol, Bristol – Liverpool and Liverpool – London) interspersed with two spur journeys, the first from Bristol south-west to Plymouth and Exeter and the second north from Liverpool to Lancaster, Whitehaven and Glasgow. In this way we covered all the major former slave ports, but we also visited many inland locations and this was significant, because it is important for people to realise that the whole country was involved in the story of slavery and abolition.

The Team

Only three people took part in the whole journey – Joseph Ankrah, Rowina Balcombe and David Pott. Trevor Moat only missed four days and five others were able to come for more than half of the journey. Another 28 people joined for shorter lengths of time. In view of these many changes and the fact that we represented 14 different nations, the team unity was quite remarkable.

One of the hardest factors was that Monette Tapa Mekomou, our leader from the slave descendant perspective had to leave on the first Tuesday evening and was not able to return until we reached Liverpool on June 23. This was the first time in 7 years that we had no slave descendant on the team! In his goodness, God provided a person of Jamaican descent, Stanley, who led us out of Chippenham and in Bath, we met a lovely Rasta called Laurence, who was deeply moved to see us and who agreed to take the snake on the pole and lead us through Bath and Bristol with his two dogs by his side! We were very sad about the difficulties our friends from Africa and the Caribbean had over visas. However after Liverpool, the team balance became perfect and happily there was a majority of African descent.

Walking in Yoke & Chains

Obviously the actual walking together was a key element in our journey. Altogether we walked on 37 days and remarkably during this time when records for wet weather were broken, we only got really wet on three occasions! The first was in Manchester where we began in a light drizzle and there were still thousands of onlookers as we walked through the Arndale Centre. It did not really pour until the last five minutes. The second occasion was when, after a start in glorious sunshine in Goyt Valley, we got drenched as we walked into Buxton. Nothing daunted, we sang our spirituals loudly and the warm welcome from the Methodists there, followed by hot baths and showers, made it all worthwhile. The final occasion was in Leicester, but once again it was conveniently placed at the end of our walk!

It was interesting to note the very different reactions to our walking in different places. The levels of interest and curiosity were very high in the majority Asian areas we walked through in Southall and Luton. The snake on the pole particularly fascinated them! Many English people like to keep 'cool' and pretend that this is the kind of thing they see every day of the week! Others may laugh or even occasionally mock. Those walking at the front of the coffle would often be aware of more negative reactions, but those walking behind and giving out leaflets would often hear conversations starting up about what we were doing.

It would be impossible to mention every walk, but here are descriptions from two very different places – Liverpool and Olney.

Our walk in Liverpool began at Princes Park and was led by a local black historian called Eric Lynch, who began by talking about the damage the three monotheistic faiths had done in Africa and then pouring a

libation to the ancestors. Three Nigerian drummers were also ahead of us. It turned out to be one of the hardest walks in our seven year history. When we walk in the yoke and chains we do so always in humility, but this time it was also an experience of humiliation. At one point, a black Liverpudlian started bellowing at us from the other side of the street. He was fuming and raging. I went over to him, to try to explain to him that he should respect the African presence on our team and that it was not just a white thing, but he just glared at me eyeball to eyeball and carried on ranting at me and releasing masses of anger and bitterness. I had to just hold it and let him do it and then walk quietly away. Fortunately, after a few more invectives, he walked away. Even though it was a hard time it was also a good time. At both the Anglican cathedral and at the dockside, there were very meaningful times of confession. We know that many peoples' lives were affected by what they saw taking place. At both the Cathedral and the Town Hall, we were given water as a symbol of life by the Archdeacon and the Deputy Mayor.

The march in Olney where John Newton was once the vicar was certainly the most colourful ever! Monette led the way holding the snake on the pole high, then came the coffle and Joseph Zintseme on the djembe. Next were four local beauty queens, followed by a group of chanting Buddhist monks from Milton Keynes! Then came uniformed scouts and brownies and a bunch of local people and finally Ghanaian drummers from Wellingborough bringing up the rear in striking striped costume. It was both hilarious and very moving at the same time! We were still walking in humility and recalling the horrors of the slave trade, but there were hints of jubilee also.

In the first fortnight, we were fortunate to walk in such varied rural locations - the Kennet & Avon Canal, the Savernake Forest, the Wessex Ridgeway to Avebury Stone Circle and along a section of the Costwold Way. The roughest patch was just before Worcester beside the River Severn where it was very overgrown and in one place it was quite a struggle to get up a slippery bank especially in the yoke and chains - a reminder of what it must have been like.

Most of our walking though was in towns and cities - here is a final example from Birmingham. We had taken part in an event with school children at the Central Library. A piper came and we all sang 'Amazing Grace' before we walked off down New Street. A little later we had one of those dissonant, but rather comical moments when we found ourselves being led through Birmingham City centre in the yoke and chains while the piper played 'It's a long way to Tipperary'! However we got back on target a short while later, when Sally Anne Dyer knelt down and confessed the city's role in the gun trade.

Media

We had not expected the media to be so interested this time but there was good local and regional coverage in newspapers, radio and TV.

Education

We had excellent times in many schools around the country and this may well have been the most significant feature of this journey in the long term. The combination of introducing our team from different nations, using the 'Yokes & Chains' DVD, showing our symbols and then Joseph Ankrah sharing a message on the djembe drum was compelling.

Highlights include amazing multicultural assemblies in Southall, Derby and Mill Hill, an assembly with 750 pupils at St Peter's High School in Exeter and sharing in the little village schools in Painswick and Cranham. In Crewe we were in quite a rough secondary school and there was one particular boy who we assumed was the brightest boy in the class because he was so engaged and full of questions. The teacher said afterwards that he had been a lot of trouble since coming to the school and that this was the first thing that had really captured his attention. It turned out that his grandfather was also from Jamaica!

Church

The March of the Abolitionists provided an opportunity for the church to identify with our apology and also with remembering the role of abolitionists. We found the Anglican church to be particularly responsive following the apology last year. In Exeter (where in 1834 the former Bishop received £13,000 in compensation for the loss of his slaves!) the Dean and the Canon Missioner walked with us - the two scarlet clad clerics at front and back framing the others of us in SO SORRY T-shirts was something rather different! The Bishop of Worcester walked the last stretch into Worcester with us. He commented: "Thank-you so much Abolitionists for coming to Worcester and bringing us your energy and hope. Let freedom ring - and the yoke I briefly wore be thrown off." The Bishop of Birmingham also walked in the yoke with us into Birmingham as did the Bishop of Brixworth when we walked into Kettering.

For just one example of excellent cooperative church involvement, in Reading there is a large mural about African history. With that as our backdrop, we had a significant event at the end of our march. There was a very good introduction from Yinka Oyekan, a Nigerian pastor, then the Bishop of Reading spoke very movingly applying Galatians 3:28 to the context. Those in the coffin knelt down and Malcolm Peirce (a local church leader who had organised all this so well) confessed Reading's involvement in the issues both historical and contemporary. A big emphasis was on seeing people of African descent released into fulfilling their destiny in the town. That night we had more opportunity to go deeper with these things at an evening meeting at a Pentecostal Church. We then stayed at an Anglican church. The next morning, we shared a breakfast time meeting with local church leaders from many denominations. We felt that what happened in Reading was exactly what we wanted.

Civic

In 19 places civic receptions or other meetings with mayors and other leaders in the community were arranged. These were valuable occasions. Some mayors were already wholeheartedly behind what we were doing and others said they would reflect and consider our message. Once again there were so many memorable occasions - here are just a few....

In Plymouth, the Mayor and his wife hosted a reception for us. They were both so warm and friendly and full of questions and eager to learn from us as well as share about Plymouth. In Lancaster the mayor listened intently to Monette's deeply moving talk and hugged her warmly. She agreed to seriously consider our suggestion of Lancaster "triangling" with the place in Africa from where she took slaves and a place in America where slaves were taken to. At the reception in Derby, about 40 local schoolchildren were also there and for them it was very special for them to be in the civic suite for the first time. I spoke with pupils from Mauritius, India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Nigeria. When we arrived at the council offices in Kettering, the mayor showed us the coat of arms with a slave with a broken shackle because of the connection with the missionary and emancipator William Knibb and then he presented each of us with a framed and personally signed copy of the coat of arms. We felt greatly honoured in Kettering and another excellent reception at the art gallery and museum followed.

Arts

It has been encouraging to see how our journey has either directly or indirectly been associated with creative activities of different kinds. People have composed songs or written poems. We have been able to participate in performances such as that by Paul Jones, Radio 2 disc jockey and formerly of Manfred Mann and the Blues Band. This was the opening event of the Ignition 07 event in Stroud with J John. We also took part in Paul Field's 'Cargo' in Manchester. We had African dancing and drumming and even the very different tap dancing in Leicester! Our Africans also thoroughly enjoyed the traditional English barn dance organized for us in Olney!

Andy Raine from the Northumbria Community joined us with his friend John in Bath & Bristol. He brought another djembe with him and it was fantastic to have two Africans drumming together in Bath and Bristol - a glorious sound! At other times we have appreciated the different djembe skills of Joseph Ankrah (like pattering feet, keeping us on the move) and Joseph Zintseme (loud staccato, a strong announcement that we have arrived with our reconciliation message!). Andy also led us in a dance in Queen Square during the Bristol walk. We had no time to rehearse and I was concerned that it was rather unprofessional, but in our comments book, we discovered that seeing black and white together in that dance was a turning point for a skeptical person of Jamaican descent who was walking with us! She ended up carrying the snake on the pole for us with a beautiful smile on her face!

Other Events

On the first day of our journey at Deptford Town Hall our taking off the yoke and chains was the first item in a reparations debate. I have been to several of these kind of events and there was a much better atmosphere of mutual respect and readiness to listen. I especially appreciated the openness and vulnerability. Toyin Agbetu (the person who disturbed the proceedings at Westminster Abbey Bicentenary service) said he was moved in his spirit and he said encouraging things about what we are doing on the March. There was also a reparations debate organized by Glasgow Anti-Racist Alliance in the sumptuous Civic Chambers and another on the Marsh Farm estate in Luton. One person there said that he felt that our walking in the yoke and chains was very insensitive. Much of what followed was a response to that from different team members which was very moving and non confrontational. That person was warm and friendly at the end of the evening and I know his concerns had been allayed.

One of the most moving events was when we met with Alan & Janet Wedgwood and around another 10 descendants of the great Josiah Wedgwood, who was a dedicated abolitionist and was responsible for commissioning the famous logo 'Am I not a Man and a Brother?' It was very special to be able to honour Josiah in front of his statue at the Wedgwood Visitor Centre. The Centre had laid on an excellent lunch for us which was an opportunity for us to get to know each other. After lunch we walked 5 miles along the canal into Stoke, where we were received by the mayor and church leaders. We then walked the short distance to Stoke Minster where Josiah Wedgwood is buried. We were released by local people of African descent. Alan Wedgwood then laid a wreath on the grave and as he did so, we clapped to express gratitude for Josiah's life. We felt very privileged to be a means of bringing the Wedgwood family together in this way.

On the following day at Englesea Brook Chapel Crewe we connected with another bicentenary - that of the Primitive Methodists - which has a curious connection with the slave trade bicentenary. The great Samuel Johnson had a Jamaica slave-born personal servant called Francis Barber. Francis married an English woman and their son Samuel Barber became a well known preacher with the Primitive Methodists. He was known as the 'Black Ranter'! We had the great joy and privilege of meeting his direct descendant Cedric Barber, who told us about his special ancestors. It was refreshing to hear someone who is so proud of his African ancestry.

In Liverpool we took part in a conference called "Reconciliation and Then...?" at the Great Hall at the Everton campus of Hope University. I shared about the March of the Abolitionists and also some vision for the future. Other speakers were very inspiring. Dominique, a sister of Anthony Walker (the boy who was killed in Liverpool and whose family made a public statement of forgiveness) gave an especially moving speech. It is likely that we will link next year with an event called the Big Hope - see <http://www.hope.ac.uk/thebighope/> for more on this.

The Final Walk

Our last walk was in the City of London. We started at All Hallows-by-the Tower and walked west along the Thames Path, pausing to kneel and pray at Sugar Quay with its direct associations with the slave trade. For me, one of the most stirring experiences was singing 'Down by the Riverside' in glorious echoing harmony as we walked through the tunnels under the bridges. We then walked north up to the Guildhall and paused to pray again there, remembering that many Lord Mayors and aldermen invested in the trade. One Lord Mayor,

William Beckford, who has his statue in the Guildhall, owned many plantations and was England's first millionaire. Judgments on the *Zong* and Somerset cases were also made at the Guildhall. We then circled slowly around the Bank of England and threaded our way down alleyways where the West India merchants met in coffee houses (the Carolina Coffee House, the Jamaica Coffee House) to secure deals which affected the lives of millions. We entered St Mary Woolnoth and reflected on the plaque to John Newton. Stanfield led us in singing 'Amazing Grace.' Finally we walked to the centre - the open space in front of the Old Stock Exchange with the Mansion House and the Bank of England around us. With all the emblems of British arrogance and pride around us, we knelt for one last time to express our apologies and repentance for what our nation did in the past and for continuing sins against Africa and her descendants. Joseph Zintseme spoke movingly as did Monette as she held high the snake on the pole supported by Stanfield and Carol. So for the last time we said the words of the liturgy for putting off the chains - such powerful phrases to declare in this place...

*"We loose you this day from these chains. Those who were slaves are the Lord's free men and women....
Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. We rejoice in the truth which always sets us free and we walk in the glorious liberty of the children of God....
If we spend ourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, our light will rise in the darkness...
We will be like a spring whose waters never fail... we will be called 'Repairers of Broken Walls.'"*

We then moved on to the Jamaica Wine Bar which had formerly been the Jamaica Coffee House. It was the perfect place to meet for this redemptive activity of celebrating the end of the March of the Abolitionists and the end of our seven year journey around the North Atlantic world.

Conclusion

It is difficult to find the right words to end with, but maybe the best two are 'Amen' and 'Thank-you!' In the last week, we found ourselves singing 'Amen' quite a lot and it seemed very appropriate as a final statement and affirmation of all that has gone before. Recently I was looking over prayer requests in February and noting how wonderfully they had all been answered. A big THANK-YOU to God is all I can say - and thank-you too to all who have joined in the Lifeline Expedition as team members, intercessors, local organizers etc. Another song for the last week was "I'm trading my sorrows" - it was significant having 'trade' in it and again there was the 'Yes Lord, Amen' in the chorus. There have been sorrows, pain and trials, but the major theme has been the grace and goodness of God to us and the blessing of unity as we have brought the reconciliation message and the apology to many. Thank-you! Hallelujah! Amen!

David Pott 19/07/07