

# QUAKER WOMEN AND ANTI-SLAVERY ACTIVISM: ELEANOR CLARK AND THE FREE LABOUR COTTON DEPOT IN STREET

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the anti-slavery activity of Quaker Eleanor Stephens Clark. It concerns a 'depot' or shop that she ran from 1853 until 1858, selling cotton goods cultivated by free-labour, rather than slave-labour. This was part of the 'Free Produce Movement' which promoted a boycott of slave-made goods and thus offered shoppers a practical contribution to abolitionism or even a remedy for the problem of slavery. The political, commercial and social aspects of Clark's shop provide the basis for a discussion of a Quaker women's anti-slavery activity, and the practical impact that it made on free-produce shoppers in the locale.

## KEYWORDS

Quaker women, Eleanor Clark, Free Produce Movement, depot, free-labour cotton.

## Introduction

This article discusses the transatlantic anti-slavery strategy known as the 'Free Produce Movement' that mobilised consumers, primarily women, to boycott or avoid a range of goods produced using the coerced labour of the enslaved. The Movement increasingly endorsed only those goods made by free-labour. The article discusses a specific instance of free-produce activity; the Free Labour Cotton Depot in Street; a small shop run by Eleanor Clark, selling cotton made by free, rather than slave-labour, that traded from 1853 until 1858, in the village of Street, in Somerset. The article draws on the Doctoral thesis I completed in 2012, entitled; 'Quaker Women, the Free Produce Movement and British Anti-Slavery Campaigns: The Free Labour Cotton Depot in Street 1853-1858' (Vaughan Kett, 2012).

## **The Free Produce Movement, Eleanor Clark and the Free Labour Cotton Depot in Street**

From the mid-eighteenth century until the 1860s, the Free Produce Movement attracted a deeply committed, inter-connected community of supporters on both sides of the Atlantic. Quaker and evangelical women and their families predominated, but as Carol Faulkner has shown, the Movement was not confined to them, but attracted a broad base of supporters especially in America (Faulkner, 2007). During the period 1790s-1820s, attention focused on slave-grown sugar, then switched to cotton, with activity peaking in the 1840s and

1850s and dwindling after the American emancipation of slaves in 1861. This article focuses on the cotton activism of the 1850s, and will discuss how market-based anti-slavery theories were put into practice by Quaker Eleanor Stephens Clark (1812-1879) who set up and ran the depot in Street to provide ethical alternatives to slave-grown cotton. Eleanor was the wife of James Clark (1811-1906), of the famous shoemaking company C. & J. Clark, founded by James and his brother Cyrus in 1825. Thus as the wife of a prominent industrialist and committed philanthropist, Eleanor Clark was well-known within business, philanthropic and Quaker networks. In addition, since James was the first cousin of Joseph Sturge (1793-1859), Britain's foremost anti-slavery campaigner, she was also closely connected with the anti-slavery establishment.

Whilst Eleanor Clark's marriage forged important connections with public culture, it should be pointed out that she avoided public recognition. It is significant that her obituary in the local press emphasised her 'motherly' role in the village, but not her various positions in public culture (Obituary, Mrs Clark, *Central Somerset Gazette*, 23 March 1879). This places Clark in what Julie Roy Jeffrey has termed the category of 'ordinary' women abolitionists who have 'remained in the shadows' and therefore have not been incorporated into the historical record (Jeffrey, 1998:2). My Doctoral thesis sought to address this; to bring the hitherto unknown Mrs Clark out of the shadows and to public attention. Whilst the Street Depot has been mentioned in articles by Louis Billington (1977 and 1987) and Clark's domestic place within the family had been discussed by Sandra Holton in her book *Quaker Women* (2007), Clark's role as an anti-slavery activist has not been explored.

The texts by Billington and Holton refer to primary evidence in the Manuscript Collection at Library of the Religious Society of Friends in London (henceforth known as the LRSF) and in the Alfred Gillett Trust at C. & J. in Somerset (henceforth known as the AGT). Upon close examination, these sources have proved to be rich in evidence of Clark's extensive anti-slavery work, primarily during her marriage, from 1835 until her death in 1879. Specifically, the LRSF holds trading records from the Street Depot, letters and pamphlets from free-cotton manufacturers, receipts and some samples of cloth (LRSF MS 8:3). The LRSF holds evidence that Clark was closely linked to the Birmingham Ladies' Negro's Friend Society, Britain's foremost female anti-slavery society. Clark corresponded with Hannah and Sophia Sturge, respectively, the wife and sister of Joseph. Clark collaborated with the Sturges in sending goods to the anti-slavery fairs at the Massachusetts

Female Emancipation Society in Boston (1843 & 1845) and subscribing to the ‘Penny Offering’, a campaign to raise funds for Harriet Beecher Stowe (1853). Clark also collaborated with Anna and Henry Richardson of Newcastle, to raise considerable funds to manumit John Weims, his wife and children (1852-3). This was a high-profile campaign, instigated by and Henry Highland Garnet of New York, more of whom will be explained later. The LRSF also holds letters to Clark from ‘The Olive Leaf Society’, a nationwide network of sewing groups, who provided articles for sale at for fundraising fairs and bazaars. This was run by Elihu Burritt (1810-1899), the Connecticut campaigner who used the proceeds for his international, Christian peace organisation ‘The League of Brotherhood’ (Tolis, 1968). Burritt became a close friend of the Clark family, and letters show that he used their home in Street as a base from which to campaign in the West of England and to visit Ireland during the Potato Famine (AGT ONE 36/13). The AGT’s substantial holdings of letters, diaries, journals, literary albums, photographs, textiles and dress (AGT collections BC, ONE, MIL, HSHC, VA & Dress Collection) demonstrate the connections between Clark’s domestic life, her position in the Quaker networks, her many charitable commitments and her anti-slavery activism.

The nineteenth century was a time of intense and far-reaching social reform and especially so within Quaker culture. Friends such as the Clarks, Frys, Richardsons and the Sturges were deeply involved in philanthropic causes, and were increasingly drawn into the social and political reform movements of the day (Isichei, 1970, O’Donnell, 2000, Holton, 2007). Their foundational role in the anti-slavery movement has been well documented, and it is widely recognised that through a variety of strategies Friends campaigned tirelessly for the cause during the anti-slavery period from the 1780s to the 1860s (Clarkson, 1808, Blackburn, 1997, Walvin, 1997, Brown, 2006, Drescher, 2009). This period also coincided with a general increase in female participation in public culture, and through the ‘social’ or charitable sphere of activity a bridge was formed between the worlds of home, commerce and politics (Midgley, 2007: 8). Clare Midgley’s foundational text (1992) established that from the 1820s, women were significantly mobilised through the new all-female anti-slavery societies such as in Walthamstow and Birmingham. These enabled women to form a distinct and essential component in the anti-slavery movement, notwithstanding that not all the participants have been identified (Midgley, 1992, Drescher, 2009). As Jeffrey writes, ‘a great silent army of women’ fulfilled multiple practical activist roles that they fitted with their

domestic and caring responsibilities (Jeffrey, 1997: 1). This was certainly the case for Eleanor Clark, who fitted her work around running a busy household (albeit with domestic servants), and managing fourteen children, born between 1836 and 1853. As Lynne Walker and Vron Ware explain, women ‘naturally’ brought the anti-slavery ethos into their homes, and they integrated their abolitionist work into ordinary, family environments (Walker & Ware, 1999). Women’s anti-slavery work was varied: organising fairs and making goods for sale; collecting funds; visiting women and families to spread the cause; writing and distributing pamphlets; educating children and households in the cause; rejecting the products of slavery and buying free-produce, and in Clark’s case, making it available to shoppers. Many women activists were Quakers, for progressive and evangelical Quaker culture encouraged participation in charitable work, the promotion of Christian values and sympathy with the slave (Bradley, 1979).

In order to understand the motivations for Clark’s shop, a little context needs to be established. Consumer activism against slave-goods dates to the mid-eighteenth century, when Quaker John Woolman rejected the corruptive influences of the world through the foods he ate and the clothes he wore (Plank, 2009). The Sugar Boycott of 1791-2 mobilised widespread British opinion against West Indian sugar, and it has been established that this contributed greatly to the success of the abolition movement (Clarkson, 1808, Midgley, 1996, Oldfield, 1997, Sussman, 2000). In the 1820s, attention shifted towards shoppers, and especially women, and the provision of a range of slave-free alternatives; notably rice, tobacco, coffee, spices and cotton. The motto ‘not made by slaves’ became ubiquitous on free-labour products, and in America a ‘slave-free’ logo on goods was used and buying such goods became increasingly widespread among those who wished to ‘do something for the slave’. These ethical female pioneers are now justly recognised as foundational to a multitude of politicised consumer movements that characterise the modern age, and although opinions differ on whether boycotts can inflict real economic harm, it is widely accepted that they empower consumers and make their objections known (Friedman, 1999, Micheletti, 2003, Glickman, 2004). Perceptions of the efficacy of the Free Produce Movement have fluctuated, and subsequent to Ruth Nuermberger’s foundational text (first published in 1942) the Movement has been somewhat side-lined, and in the opinion of Howard Temperley, deemed ‘crackpot’ and ‘marginal’ to anti-slavery history (Temperley, 1972: 246). In the 1990s however, women’s anti-slavery activism was substantially unearthed (Midgley, 1992, Jeffrey

1998) and a re-evaluation of free produce began to take place. Faulkner's important article published in 2007 was followed by work by Elizabeth O'Donnell (2000, 2009) and Julie Holcomb (2010). Therefore, Clark's depot should be seen as an example of free-produce activism, as situated within the on-going development in the historiographies of the anti-slavery movement, women, Quakers and consumers.

Buying cloth and sewing was important in the village of Street and it had a number of drapery shops on the High Street (Dunning, 2006) and it hosted two thriving women's charitable sewing circles, attended by Quaker and non-Quaker women. The first was the Street Sewing Circle, a long-running group who provided items for different causes at home and overseas. The second was the Olive Leaf Society (or 'Circle'), set up by Clark in 1851 to sew for Burritt's fairs where cotton goods sold at a premium. Roger Clark, Eleanor grandson recalled that the Street Sewing Circle was a well-run affair, attended by his grandmother, her aunt Keturah Clothier and women from the Clark, Clothier, Stephens, Reynolds, Impey, Metford and Palmer families, who met monthly in each other's homes to fulfil their workload (Clark, 1975). It should be emphasised that Street was not unusual in its enthusiasm for sewing; in the nineteenth century sewing, making and mending was commonplace enough to be known simply as 'women's work', and until the last quarter of the century when ready-made items were widespread, women were responsible for making and maintaining all the textile items used by the household and family as well as a host of charities (Parker, 1984). Women desired sociability whilst sewing, and many groups, or 'bees' were founded to provide companionship, the sharing of knowhow and materials. As Holton and O'Donnell have shown, sewing was especially prized in Quaker culture, being fundamental to the formation of Quaker women's traditional feminine identities (Holton, 2005, 2007, O'Donnell, 2000) and many Quakers set up sewing circles to make goods for specific causes such as anti-slavery fairs, and later on, to make clothes for freed slaves in America (Jeffrey, 1998, van Broekhoven, 1998, Rose, 2011).

The Street Depot was stocked through complex chain of supply of cotton goods that operated between Britain and America. This followed the same routes as slave-cotton, but it was imperative to keep slave and free-cotton separate at all times. Nuermberger writes that from the 1830s, the free-cotton trade was wholly managed by Friends, notably in Britain by the cotton merchant, Josias Browne of Manchester and in America by George Washington Taylor of the Philadelphia Free Produce Store (Nuermberger, 1970). Browne was also the

primary retailer of all free-labour cotton goods from his warehouse in Manchester. This is where Clark bought the majority of her cloth. Most raw free cotton was grown on farms in the Southern States of America, it was then shipped to Philadelphia, then to Liverpool and on to Manchester, to be spun, woven, finished and sold wholesale. Cloth was distributed to individual British and American shoppers and the proprietors of societies, stores and depots. Under the direction of Sturge, in 1849 the Anti-Slavery Society formed the Free Produce Association (also known as the Free Labour Association). Whilst the Association's records have not survived, its activities were reported in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, edited by Sturge and in the free produce newspaper, *The Slave; His Wrongs and Their Remedy* (1851-1856), created by the Richardsons. In 1851, the Association funded Browne's warehouse in Manchester, followed by one in London, run by Elizabeth Inglis and another in Dublin. By 1850, there were some twenty six free produce societies, often adjoining ladies' anti-slavery societies, for example in Walthamstow, Birmingham, Norwich and Newcastle (Midgley, 1992: 206-7). My research has uncovered over one hundred independent drapery retailers selling free-cotton, and in the West Country of England there was a significant cluster, some of which were run by Friends. These included the following – in Bristol, Selfe & Wilmot, Withy & Little, Fisher King & Lovell, Tardrew & Tibball, King & Gurney, Phoebe Gregory, Mr Gregory, Mr Candy, George Withy, Joseph Ramsdale and Thomas Reynolds; in Bath shops were run by Mrs Sturge and Mr Lambert, and in Exeter, by Messrs Ross (Vaughan Kett, 2012: 244-251). It should be added that relatively close to Street there was a free-labour cotton depot in Bath, run by the city's female anti-slavery society (see flyer in LRSF MS 8:4).

This leads us to consider why Clark opened the shop, given that free cotton was available in the region at various locations and could be acquired through the post from warehouses in London, Dublin and Manchester. It is important to note that Clark was foremost motivated to 'do something for the slave'. Abolitionism was deeply engrained in her family, and especially among the women. Clark's mother Amy Metford Stephens (1773-1847) and her sisters were ardent abolitionists and friends of Thomas Clarkson (Stephens, 1999). Sentiments were passed to Eleanor and her sisters Rebecca, Ann and Eliza who also worked with the Birmingham Ladies on a number of campaigns. Eleanor's daughter, Sophia Sturge Clark (1849-1933) continued to campaign for the global abolition of slavery, and with her cousin, Catherine Impey (1847-1923), co-ordinated donations to the Freedmen's Aid

Society which continued to provide packages of aid to ex-slaves after emancipation in 1861 and to campaign for the rights of freedmen. A close friend of African-American abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Ida Wells, Impey brought both activists to Britain for lecture tours, and between 1888 and 1893 she published the ground-breaking anti-racist journal *Anti-Caste*, from her home in Street (Ware, 1992, Bressey, 2008). In addition Eleanor Clark had very good standing in the locale, she the funds to get started and she may well have recognised that a free-cotton shop in the village would do well among her sewing cohort, given their heavy requirements for charitable sewing. Commerce and the drapery trade came naturally to Clark, for as well as the Clarks' huge success in shoemaking, her parents and siblings ran a large drapery store in Bridport in Dorset, and her aunt ran a successful woollen store in Glastonbury.

As demonstrated within the generations of Clark's family, women's abolitionism formed a part of a continuing chain of humanitarian activism, which cemented a network of participants and was woven into the fabric of their lives. Free-produce was built on these principles, and it followed the paradigm that consumers could give expression to their political views through purchase and avoidance of certain goods, and this enabled legitimate, direct action on an everyday basis. Arguably it was for these very reasons that free-produce generated fierce hostility in Britain and America, and their respective anti-slavery societies remained deeply divided on the matter. Importantly free-produce drew disparagement from the leading American abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison. After a period of ardent support, in the late 1840s he turned against free-produce, for in his opinion it was a distraction from the campaign for immediate emancipation of slaves (Temperley, 1972). Garrison had substantial influence on both sides of the Atlantic and some traditionalists, notably from the Estlin family, whose members led the Bristol anti-slavery societies were very vocal in their objections. Some detractors also objected to the public-sphere involvement of women, others mistrusted the effectiveness of consumer action, and there was strong disapproval at the involvement of the American Quakers Lucretia and James Mott, who imparted a spirit of radicalism to free produce activity (Faulkner, 2007).

Important voices however rallied the free produce cause. In the 1820s English pamphleteer Elizabeth Heyrick advocated 'clean hands' and rationalised that free-produce was the 'shortest and most effectual' means to end slavery. The persuasive and highly emotional works of American Quaker poet Elizabeth Margaret Chandler continued to be

published after her death in 1836, notably in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* and *The Slave*. Chandler's abhorrence of 'tainted' goods and graphic visualisations of the slave's presence within slave-grown cotton provided a powerful prompt to reject slave-goods. The moral reasons were certainly clear; as Chandler explained, those who bought 'stainless fabric' avoided 'all things cursed by Slavery's touch' (Chandler, 'Free Labour Cotton' in Lundy, 1836). Therefore the potential was very strong for free-labour cotton, if women could be persuaded to buy it and if suppliers could keep pace with demand.

In the 1850s, the Richardsons captured the mood for practicality in their newspaper *The Slave; His Wrongs and Their Remedy* (1851-1856), whose masthead proclaimed, 'Slavery is sustained by the purchase of its productions. If there were no consumers of slave-produce, there would be no slaves.' The paper was read by between 3,500 and 5,000 subscribers each month, primarily by Quaker and evangelical families, including the Sturges and the Clarks and it is imagined that the paper was distributed at groups and meetings. The paper was divided into two halves; the first focused on the barbarism of slave-holding, and the second provided 'the remedy' to the cruelties described. Above all, *The Slave* was deeply committed to free-labour cotton, and its warm encouragement and practical advice to shoppers, on where to buy it and how it was produced was pitched directly at women consumers. The Richardsons believed that free-labour cotton stimulated empathy and connection with the slave and this validated dress as a means to enact abolitionism. They wrote that free-cotton clothing was a 'perpetual remembrance with the slave' and 'in drawing on a stocking, or adjusting a frock they [abolitionists] ... are silently but impressively exhorted to "remember those that are in bonds"' (*The Slave*, March, 1851:10). When Burritt became editor of *The Slave* in 1855, he took a more assertive tone, arguing that abolitionists had a *duty* to wear what he termed the 'free produce uniform,' in order to prove 'depth of conviction' in 'the moral crusade' (*The Slave*, May, 1855: 23).

Anti-slavery feeling grew considerably when Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in Britain in 1852. In response to Stowe's depiction of the horrors of the plantation, the British public was caught in a wave of 'Uncle Tom mania' (Meer, 2005). Clark was deeply affected, collecting money for Stowe and even adopting the pen name 'Eva', when writing on slavery in 'Village Album' the local essay society, in reference to Tom's friend 'Little Eva' or Evangeline in the novel (AGT VA 0/1). During her visit to Britain the following year, Stowe became a keen convert to free-produce, having been deeply



impressed by the well-appointed free-produce home of the Sturge family in Edgbaston (Stowe, 1854). This substantially raised the profile of free-produce, and it helped to counter the claims that it was sub-standard or impractical – a view that prevailed in America.

The commercial and industrial contexts to the Street Depot are important to consider, for the mid-nineteenth century was a time of transformation of British society due to extensive industrialisation (McCord & Purdue, 2007). Changes were also felt in the village of Street, for as mechanised shoemaking at C. & J. Clark generated great profit, the family ploughed resources into the local community (Barber, 1950, Sutton, 1979, McGarvie, 1987, Milligan, 2007). As a result, the village was transformed from a small rural community to a thriving industrial ‘model village’, complete with schools, housing, recreation facilities, infrastructure and improved transport, which doubled in size in forty years to 2,000 inhabitants in 1881 (Dunning, 2006: 168). Although but a small proportion of village population (sixty one members recorded at Meeting in 1851), the Quaker community was a significant one, and the village was substantially modelled by the Clarks and their kin (Clark, 1975, Darley, 2007, Milligan, 2007). Given the combination of Quaker and commercial cultures, it is therefore not surprising that Street constituted a ‘fertile ground’ (Bancroft Clark in Clark, 1975: xix) for both commerce and philanthropy, as embodied in the Street Depot.

The fact that the depot only sold cotton is also important to consider, for in many ways, cotton epitomised the Victorian age, as a ‘wonder textile’ that was popular, plentiful and fashionable. Through the import of low-priced raw cotton and industrialised spinning and weaving processes, from the 1840s and 1850s cotton cloth was sold at prices that all but the poorest members of society could enjoy (Lemire, 1991, 2010, 2011). Quakers also embraced cotton, and this was especially apparent in women’s attire, where it was used as a replacement for linen in making traditional-style white collars, cuffs, caps and aprons (Kendall, 1985). Many cotton accessories from this period have survived, as can be seen in the Costume Collections in the LRSF and the AGT, and from the 1850s, cotton was increasingly used in making entire Quaker gowns. This trend is recorded in the medium of photography, for example the photographic ‘cartes de visite’ of women Friends, once belonging to the Friends’ Institute in London and now archived in the LRSF. It should be noted that Eleanor, James and the children were frequently recorded in photographs, taken by professionals and family members (see the Museum of Shoemaking at C. & J. Clark and holdings in AGT HSHC 55).

Britain's burgeoning cotton industry had of course, embedded within it a deeply unpleasant truth, for the popularity of British cloth was directly attributed to the practise of slavery. By the 1850s American slave-plantations were responsible for virtually all global cultivation of raw cotton, with some 90% shipped to Lancashire to be made into cloth. Britain looked to American for 77% of its raw cotton needs, which amounted to between one and two million bales per annum in the 1840s and 1850s (Farnie and David, 2004: 68) and America's so-called 'peculiar institution' was viewed in the main, as a 'disagreeable but unavoidable evil' (Farnie and David, 2004: 19). The free-produce community found this argument completely utterly reprehensible; they were repelled by slave-cotton and viewed it as 'a particular challenge' which was imperative to overcome (Richardson, 1848). John Bright, the Quaker spinner and M.P. for Rochdale pressed the Government to invest in alternative producers, notably in the West Indies, India and Africa (Silver, 1966). Keen interest in Africa as a commercial alternative to America, must be seen in the context of a widening European interest in Africa and the 'scramble' to establish colonies and trade routes. Expeditions to map Africa's interior to establish colonies, coupled with the activities of the Church Missionary Society encouraged new cotton farms, notably in Nigeria, and plans were laid for the re-settlement of ex-slaves to work the new cotton fields. Thus the discourses of Empire, exploration and commerce intersected with those of abolitionism and free-labour cotton was signalled as having an important commercial and moral future (Vaughan Kett, 2012: 101-104).

By the time the Street depot opened, the demand for free cotton cloth was established and free-produce supporters called passionately for increased choice and availability in the marketplace (see *The Slave* 1850-1855). Quaker abolitionists were especially attuned to the ethical provenance of their clothing, for certain dress codes had been long-established in Quaker culture and Plainness or simplicity were careful expressions of Friends' rejection of worldliness and the evils of the world, which in this case, included slavery (Tolles, 1959, Kendall, 1985, Lapsansky & Verplanck, 2003). Quaker anti-slavery dress was therefore an extension of the powerful moral views they had already established, and it added an additional dimension to the Quaker pursuit of 'the best sort' of clothing, equating it with moral progress and freedom. However, despite its evident importance among lives of supporters, the free-cotton industry was always a very small concern. Non-slave raw cotton imports formed but a fraction of a percentage of the estimated one to two million bales of

slave-cotton that entered Britain each year in the 1850s (Billington, 1977, Vaughan Kett, 2012). Despite the efforts of Sturge, cotton activism became somewhat marginalised by the Anti-Slavery Society, whose members could not agree on its efficacy. Free-cotton however continued to thrive among independent-minded activists and attracted high-profile support came from America, notably from the outspoken African-American abolitionist and ex-slave Henry Highland Garnet. The *Anti-Slavery Reporter* chronicled Garnet's tour of Britain (1851-2), where in January 1851, an audience of 2,000 gathered in Gateshead to hear his emotive rhetoric and to see displays of locally-purchased free-labour cloth alongside whips and shackles. It reported that his words resonated especially with Quaker women, whom he urged to 'take it into their own hands' in the fight against slavery. Despite these powerful endorsements, Garrison's dismissal of free-produce cast a long shadow, opinions remained divided and at times, free-produce supporters found themselves the object of ridicule. American abolitionist Samuel May demonstrates this, in correspondence with John Estlin, he stated 'As the principal weapon of offence it [free produce] be very like bailing out the Atlantic with a spoon' (May in Blackett, 1983: 119-20). Writing in 1851 to American campaigner, Maria Chapman of Boston, Estlin castigated Garnet for talking 'nonsense about freeing slaves by Quaker ladies giving up the use of dresses made with American [slave] cotton' (Estlin in Blackett, 1983: 122). It is clear that Estlin saw women's boycott of slave-cotton as having no practical consequence, furthermore his belittling of 'Quaker ladies' suggests a mistrust of both women and Quakers; a refusal to accept their political identities and their choice to use their bodies and clothing as a means to express anti-slavery sympathy. The body was indeed a contested space, subject to debates concerning autonomy, power and control. As Mary Douglas writes, 'the powers and dangers credited to social structure [are] reproduced in small on the human body' (Douglas, 2002: 115-121).

This brings us back to the work of one such 'Quaker lady' who engaged in what Estlin called 'nonsense' concerning her 'dresses'. In May, 1853, Eleanor Clark opened the Free Labour Cotton Depot in Street. Clark judged it timely, for as announced in the advertising flyer, 'At the present time, when the subject of Slavery is exciting much attention in the public mind, through the reading of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"' (LRSF MS 8:4). Although the word 'depot' suggests an industrial and large-scale environment, the Street Depot was in fact rather modest, resembling a stall at a bazaar or fair – a table top on two trestles, a shelf, a stand and two chairs, set up each day afresh in the communal space of the village temperance

hall. The hall had been financed by her husband and his brother Cyrus in 1847, and it stood a few steps from her home, on the High Street, in a good position to attract passing trade (McGarvie, 1987). Notwithstanding that some pages may be missing, the surviving 'Account Book' of the depot tells us a great deal about how it conducted its business (LRSF MS 8:5). It records sums incoming, outgoing, yearly summaries and day-to-day sales. Records show that the depot opened on 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1853, set up on twenty five pounds, borrowed from family, friends and the shoemaking firm and it closed on 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1858. During the five year period yearly income ranged from twenty five to fifty pounds, which derived principally from sales of cloth, of which a total of approximately 1,200 yards were sold. Sales however were recorded only in the first two years (1853 and 1854), yet the depot continued to buy stock for the Olive Leaf Society. Records of those items sold at the depot matched those listed in pamphlets sent by Josias Browne (1853a & b) and several receipts from Browne have also survived (LRSF 8: 4&5). No sums for rental or wages were recorded, placing the enterprise firmly in the charitable sector and in 1858 Clark wound up the business, with loans paid off and with neither debts nor profits accrued, as shown in her final statement with the accountant of the shoemaking firm.

From the record of sales it is possible to work out what was sold, to analyse tastes and to hypothesise what the cloth may have been used to make. In order of popularity, the depot sold calico, gingham, lining, muslin, print and dimity and it carried patterns or samples of other textiles to order. It also offered a small range of haberdashery items, knitting and sewing yarn and a few readymade items such as gloves, stockings and mourning gowns made from black 'barège' gauze. Records show that although Clark contacted different manufacturers she bought regularly from only two suppliers; J.F. Browne & Co., of Brown Street in Manchester and John Wingrave of the 'Cumberland Co-Operative Free Labor Gingham Company', also known as the 'Free Labor Gingham Company' in Stanwix, Carlisle (LRSF MS 8:4). The surviving samples sent by Browne in 1853 provide physical evidence of the types of cloth she sold – complex, large-patterned checked gingham, woven cloth of various colours, designs and weights and plain, textured and printed muslin with small patterns, in a choice of colours. These are fairly representative of mainstream cloth at the time, and they catered to the relatively traditional tastes of nineteenth century Friends (Tozer, 1983, Montgomery, 1984). The cloth is also of a high quality, being evenly woven, with delicately printed and subtle patterns. This confirms that the depot's shoppers were

discerning, and wanted cloth that was to use the well-known phrase attributed to Friends, ‘of the best sort but plain’ (Tolles, 1959, Kendall, 1985, Lapsansky and Verplanck, 2003). Clark also bought directly from a specialist handloom gingham workshop in Carlisle, run as a co-operative by John Wingrave. This was highly unusual, for it created bespoke cloth in a variety of weights and widths, woven on handlooms, to the customer’s own designs from ‘warranted’ free-labour yarn. As *The Slave* explained, as well as producing excellent cloth, the firm also cared deeply for its workers and their families, offering food, accommodation and education (May, 1853 & January, 1854). This gave a beacon of hope to the unemployed handloom weavers, now suffering extreme hardship in the wake of mechanisation in the cotton industry (Rose, 1996, Bythell, 1969, Thompson, 1963). The press interest points to the free-produce community’s real concern with humanitarian enterprises, and this was reflected in Street.

The Account Book show that the depot opened for most weeks of the year, with flexible opening times, possibly only in the afternoons, as was the case at the depot in Bath. This would fit with Clark’s domestic duties in running the home and looking after the children, one of whom was born in 1853. The record of sales show that the years 1853 and 1854 were the active periods of selling, with the busiest month being June 1853, with sales listed on thirteen days amounting to thirty eight transactions. No trading was recorded after 1854, although Clark continued to buy stock throughout 1855 and possibly she may have distributed cloth to her sewing groups. The cluster of sales in the summer fits with the charitable sewing timetable, for most charity fairs were held in December, and six months was the time recommended by organisers to prepare goods (Jeffrey, 1998).

This brings us to who shopped at the depot and what they made with the cloth. As discussed, charitable sewing was strong, and a local cohort of roughly twenty women, primarily Quakers, participated in a number of interconnected activities. It is envisaged that these women formed the core of shoppers at the depot (Vaughan Kett, 2012: 118-157). The cohort attended the Street Sewing Circle and Olive Leaf Society, as well as the Quaker Women’s Monthly Meeting, the Teetotal Society, The Bible Society and a clothing charity called The Penny Clothing. Many also signed up for fundraising campaigns and donations to anti-slavery cause. It is assumed that shoppers also came from neighbouring villages and since Quaker kinship was strong, it is likely that local kinswomen supported Clark’s depot. Non-Quaker villagers may also have shopped there, for the depot was in a convenient

location and its prices were conspicuously low, as compared to other ordinary and free-cotton retailers who advertised in the local and national press. Considering the prominence of the Clark family and the Quaker network and the print run of two hundred copies for the depot's advertising flyer (see receipt from William Welch, LRSF MS 8:3), it is likely that the depot was well-known in the locale. It is also important to remember that the goods Clark stocked and the ambiance she created may have been highly appealing, and the fact that she sold goods from a stall in the temperance hall may have added to the excitement – for this replicated the novelty and excitement of a fair, where bargains were to be found. As the trading records of other free-labour cotton depots have not been found, it is not possible to make direct comparisons with other similar British establishments. It is however possible to compare the depot to one in America, especially since both shops were supplied from the same manufacturers. The Philadelphia Free Produce Store was a large store in the city centre which traded from 1847-1867, run by Quaker George Washington Taylor. Clearly the shops were situated in very different environments and were vastly different in scale, for in 1853 Taylor placed an order with Wingrave for 3,000 yards of gingham, which was too large for Wingrave to complete (Nuermberger, 1970: 88). This reinforces the difference between them; a single order for the Philadelphia Store was over double the entire volume of cloth sold at the Street Depot over five years, and Taylor's problems in securing stock will be discussed later on.

Using contemporary texts, notably the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and a sewing guide *The Workwoman's Guide* (1835), some conclusions may be drawn on what the cloth may have been used to make. The largest sale at the depot was for forty yards of calico, which may have been used for household furnishings or multiples of items, as outlined in *The Workwoman's Guide*. This is borne out by Clark's grandson, who recalls that printed 'Holland' pinafores were made up by Quakers, to present as prizes at the British School in the village (Clark, 1975: 5). The smallest sale was for a quarter of a yard of calico which was sufficient for a variety of small items, such as needle cases, pen wipers and handkerchiefs; these were necessities of daily life and were very popular 'pocket money' items on stalls at fairs (Jeffrey, 1998: 106-126). It is interesting that certain sales recurred, such as six yards of gingham and calico, and one yard of muslin. Six yards of cloth, also known as a 'length' was the standard quantity to make one adult Quaker gown, or two for girls. One yard of cloth was

sufficient for twelve baby caps, one dress apron, one full kerchief or four adult caps (*The Workwoman's Guide*, 1838: Chapter vi 'Making Quaker Clothes').

The record of sales also pinpoints which textiles were most in demand. Most popular was 'calico' of which 481 yards were sold. This was a broad descriptor for bleached or unbleached, plain or printed smooth cloth, used for the widest variety of uses (Levitt in Rose, 1996: 155-160). Clark's calico sold from three to nine pennies per yard, and the cheaper types fit with an article in the press on the making of economical undergarments, which stated that more than five and a half pennies a yard would be 'an extravagance' (*Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, 1858-9: 92). Recurrent sales of calico were for six and twelve yards, suggesting large items, dresses or sets, such as the dozen undergarments and night dresses detailed in the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*. The textile known as 'gingham' followed in popularity, of which a total of 371 yards was sold. Although now known as a checked cloth, in the nineteenth century gingham indicated both striped and checked cloth which were manufactured in a huge variety of designs and grades. *The Workwoman's Guide* mentions gingham priced at two pennies a yard, which it recommended for economical and charitable projects (p.12-18). Clark sold several qualities which she priced from three and a half to eight pennies a yard and recurrent sales were for three, six and nine yards, suggesting larger items, dresses and multiples. The fabric known as 'lining' was the next best seller, for a total of 178 yards was sold. This dense, smooth, plain cloth was sometimes glazed, selling at the depot for between four and six pennies a yard. Lining was used wherever an extra layer, opacity or reinforcement was required, and it was also used as a base for needlework and in making cushions, bags and pockets (Parker, 1984). Recurrent sales were for one, four, six and seven yards, confirming that lining was used in different quantities, according to individual projects. The next popular fabric was 'muslin,' for a total of seventy nine yards was sold. This fine, gauzy cloth was chiefly used for accessories and infant wear, selling at the depot for between nine and twelve pennies a yard, making it costly compared to the other fabrics. The most popular sales were for one, one and a quarter, one and a half, two and three yards, indicating that amounts tended to be small and measurement precise for this costly fabric. Clark stocked several types, including unbleached and 'hair cord' and 'tape check' which had subtle woven patterns, and may have been used for baby's clothing. Next in popularity was the fabric known as 'print' of which fifty two yards was sold. A generic term for patterned, printed cotton of many types, but especially calico, print

sold at the depot for between seven and a half and nine and a half pennies a yard, in sales of two, six, twelve and twenty two yards, indicating that it was used for larger projects. Print was comparatively unpopular and possibly it was not regarded as a 'safe' choice by more traditional Friends who worried over the suitability of designs and colours (Laspanky and Verplanck, 2002). The least popular cloth was 'dimity' which was a dense, usually white cloth, sometimes woven with raised spots, or printed with spots. Although described by Browne as being 'suitable for ladies dresses' (Browne, 1853a) it was rather costly, selling at eleven pennies a yard and it was not very popular, for a total of ten yards was sold, in just three sales of one, two and three quarters and six and a quarter yards. With the exception of the larger piece which could have been used for a gown or maybe a dressing robe, it is likely that dimity was used for small items or accessories.

It would be interesting to compare the depot's trading to that of the Free Labour Cotton Depot in Bath, but unfortunately the records have not survived. There are in fact very few traces of this enterprise, save for entries in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (May-June, 1853) and as mentioned, the advertising flyer. This much is known; the Bath Depot was located twenty miles away from Street, in premises at 14, Orange Grove in the centre of the city, close to the Abbey and it was run by the city's female anti-slavery society, opening from noon until four each day. The flyers are nearly identical, listing the same goods and both referring to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, making it likely that the depots were connected in some way. Perhaps they were associated through women's kinship and anti-slavery networks, as reinforced by the fact that the flyers are archived together in the LRSF with papers relating to the Birmingham Ladies. Dwindling reports in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* indicate that it slipped from view soon after opening in May 1853, and the gloomy reportage of a dire shortage of goods makes it likely that lack of capital was the reason for its failure. This makes a contrast with the warm endorsement for Clark's depot given by Sturge in his 'Report of the Fourth Annual Free Labour Association' in 1853 (LRSF MS Box 8:3). In addition, Garrisonian views, especially emanating from Bristol may have spread some negative feeling, and possibly issues of taste may have played a part, with free-produce goods lacking appeal in such a fashionable city (Billington, 1977: 327).

The poor public image of free-labour cotton seems to have been a considerable stumbling block. *The Slave* devoted much column space to dispelling myths about inferior quality and urging the community to stay firm in their beliefs. There is no evidence that Clark



experienced any problems with securing good quality and attractively priced stock, and this is interesting to consider in light of Browne's admission that he was battling with procuring enough high-quality, raw, free-cotton and this he believed was reflected in the quality, and forced him to charge a 'few pennies' more than slave-cotton (Browne, 1853a). The letters however written by Taylor to Browne, who was his principal supplier provide a fascinating insight into the real problems of conducting transatlantic business in a specialised branch of the cotton industry (see *Taylor Letterbooks* in Haverford Library). The letters are deeply acrimonious, for it appears that Taylor experienced many problems; sub-standard cloth that arrived late, at the wrong time of year and which was of unsuitable and even unsaleable style. Linguistics may have played a part, for in 1852, infuriated by being sent articles he had not ordered, Taylor wrote, 'Will you understand my words literally, I mean according to their plain sense' (8<sup>th</sup> Mo, 8<sup>th</sup>, 1852). When one shipment finally arrived, the rolls of cloth were of such poor quality that he was unable to put them out for sale and it seems that patterned cloth caused the most problems. Taylor complained that they were 'very badly printed with holes in the white ground ... I am at a loss at what to do with them'. He wrote, 'My customers are exceedingly particular' and although he believed that 'some might compromise a little, in the main, they would not sacrifice quality for any reason' (8<sup>th</sup> Mo, 8<sup>th</sup>, 1852). Taylor repeatedly requested textiles with small patterns and more simple styles, 'Please avoid colours ... to please plain people' (8<sup>th</sup> Mo, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1852). In 1854, it appears that Browne had got the season quite wrong and Taylor 'quite despaired' of being sent summer fabrics in February (2<sup>nd</sup> Mo, 6<sup>th</sup>, 1854). In 1855 Taylor found himself in an 'unpleasant fix' for he had accumulated quantities of useless goods, he wrote angrily 'I was compelled to ask you wholly to cease sending me any goods, and I now must repeat this notice ... really it is not joking matter, I am loaded with things I cannot sell' (2<sup>nd</sup> Mo, 6<sup>th</sup>, 1855). Such letters reinforce that the securing of free-labour cotton stock was not always straightforward, and it is to Clark's credit that she managed to stock the depot with saleable cloth.

After 1854, no sales were recorded at the Street Depot, but it continued to purchase quantities of stock, under the Olive Leaf Society. At the same time Clark also bought amounts of free produce sugar, syrup and tapioca which she may have been supplying to friends and family, although there is no evidence that she was paid. In 1858 Clark disposed of the remaining stocks of gingham, lining and muslin to John Coole, a Quaker draper on the High Street, presumably to sell in his shop. The last recorded transaction in the account book

was on 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1858, for a quantity of muslin she bought on behalf of the Olive Leaf Society.

This leads us to consider the value of the Street Depot, and to discuss what impacts it made in the locale, and how to situate it within anti-slavery history. Whilst commercially the depot was very small fry, throughout the period of its activity it had a high social value, for it provided a service to a cohort of shoppers who appreciated free-cotton of a good quality and suitable range of types and designs, and who did not wish to pay over the odds for it. This was clearly not a commercial venture, indeed the prosperity of C. & J. Clark ensured that it had no need to be, however, it can be predicted that it was important for the venture to succeed, given the Clark family's high status in the village. Since the income from sales of goods precisely matched outlay on buying stock, this indicates that prices were knowingly kept as low as possible and this may well have increased popularity and reinforced that this was a fair shop. For example, when compared to the free labour cotton drapers F.E. Wright of Kettering and Joseph Ramsdale of Bristol, who advertised in an advertising supplement to *British Friend* (1848), Clark's prices were the same or lower. Wright's cheapest calico was advertised at three pennies a yard, the same as Clark's and Ramsdale's 'India long cloth' (plain calico from India) sold at four and a half pennies a yard, which was one and a half pennies more than Clark's. Her prices were also low when compared to drapers selling slave-cotton. The elite West End drapers, King & Co. of Regent Street advertised in *The Illustrated London News* (20 April, 1850). Their cotton percale, barège and muslin were prices were priced at over a shilling a yard, making them more costly than Clark's finest cloth. When compared to less elite mercers Rowland & Hooper of Edgware Road, who advertised in the same paper, they were still higher than Clark's. It is therefore evident that Clark was supplying free-cotton cloth at comparable or lower prices than other drapers in both the free-cotton and slave-cotton trades.

### **Conclusions**

The short, intense period of cotton activism in the 1850s corresponds exactly with the life of the Street Depot. The principles of supply and demand heavily influenced the story of free-cotton activism, for as demand increased in the early 1850s goods were pushed into the marketplace, and as it declined after 1855 production dwindled and goods became difficult to find. This was understood by the Walthamstow Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society who cited 'the

truths of the mercantile axiom that “demand creates supply”” to urge ‘all freedom loving people to refuse the products of slavery’ (*Anti-Slavery Reporter*, November 1852: 172-3). The advertising flyer suggests that the Street Depot was a shop, for indeed it sold goods, but in truth it was a stall, as seen at fairs, providing abolitionist cotton at cost price, to the interested community. As such it was of great significance to the woman who ran it, and to her community of shoppers who used free-cotton in their homes and in communal and charity projects.

The social identity of the depot was reinforced by its location within the temperance hall; this embedded in the social domain and the world of moral reform, as instigated and visibly supported by the Clark family. More than a shop, it had both philosophical and political significance, and above all it made a highly practical contribution to the anti-slavery movement. It allowed customers to construct a particular version of self, through the purchase of an ethical commodity which they took into their homes, wore on their bodies and sewed into items for fairs to raise funds for good causes. Interestingly, this was an enterprise that spanned the spheres of activity – private, social and public, making it a good example of what we now know to be nineteenth century women’s ability to segue between activities and to construct multiple identities within the confines of cultural and social attitudes (Poovey, 1988, Davidoff and Hall, 1992).

The Free Labour Cotton Depot in Street was certainly small in scale, but small does not mean restricted or insignificant. It catered successfully to the needs of both its proprietor and her customers and its rationales could hardly have been more politically radical or far-reaching – refusal to accept wrong-doing and freedom to the enslaved. Therefore the depot is loaded with political significance; dissent with slavery, a boycott of the Anglo-American slave-cotton industry and a practical and lawful means for unnamed and ordinary people to campaign for freedom. It was after all through the grass-roots activity of the Free Produce Movement that the boycott became a powerful weapon against the ‘tainted’ goods of the slave-cotton industry, and thus against slavery itself.

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