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Buxton, Sir Thomas Fowell, first baronet 🔓

(1786–1845)

Olwyn Mary Blouet

Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, first baronet (1786–1845)

by Benjamin Robert Haydon, 1840

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Buxton, Sir Thomas Fowell, first baronet (1786–1845), politician and philanthropist, born on 1 April 1786, was the eldest son of Thomas Fowell Buxton, of Earl's Colne, Essex, and his wife, Anna, daughter of Osgood Hanbury, of Holfield Grange, in the same county. His mother, who was a member of the Society of Friends,

was a woman of intelligence and energy. His father, an East Anglian squire, died when he was six years old. At an early age Buxton was sent to a school at Kingston upon Thames, where he was ill treated. His health suffered, and he was moved to the school at Greenwich run by Dr Charles Burney. After leaving school at the age of fifteen, he spent considerable time with the Gurneys, an influential Quaker family, at Earlham Hall, Norwich. He was expected to inherit Irish property (which did not materialize) and entered Trinity College, Dublin, in October 1803 after several months of private tuition in Ireland. He was awarded distinctions in all but one of his examinations at Dublin and received the university gold medal.

Before he had turned twenty-one Buxton was invited to stand as a parliamentary candidate for Trinity College, but declined on account of his intention to enter a business career and his impending marriage to Hannah (1783–1872), fifth daughter of John Gurney of Earlham Hall. Their marriage took place on 13 May 1807, after his return to England. Hannah and her Quaker family (to which Buxton was distantly related) had an important influence on his spiritual life and political career. Elizabeth Fry, the prison reformer, was his sister-in-law, and Joseph John Gurney, the anti-slavery advocate, his brother-in-law. Anna Gurney, Hannah's cousin, was later to help Buxton with his researches into slavery.

In 1808 Buxton joined the brewers Truman, Hanbury & Co. of Spitalfields, London, where his maternal uncle was a partner. His mother had stressed the importance of philanthropy and, encouraged by William Allen, he became involved in various charitable activities in Spitalfields, especially those connected with education, the Bible Society, and the relief of distressed weavers. He defended the Bible Society in 1812 against the attacks of Herbert Marsh, bishop of Peterborough. In 1816, when hunger was widespread in Spitalfields, Buxton delivered a forcible speech, based on his own investigations of conditions, at a meeting at the Mansion House which raised £43,369. An extensive and well-organized system of relief was subsequently set up. Influenced by Elizabeth Fry and his brother-in-law Samuel Hoare, he made several visits to Newgate Prison, and published his findings as *An inquiry whether crime and misery are produced or prevented by our present system of prison discipline* (1818). The book went through five editions in a year, was praised by Sir James Mackintosh in the House of Commons, and was translated into French and widely circulated in Europe. Its reception in India indirectly led to an inquiry into the scandalous management of Madras gaols. In England its publication led to the formation of the Society for the Reformation of Prison Discipline, of which Buxton was a committee member.

At the general election of 1818 Buxton was elected MP for Weymouth, and he subsequently represented the borough until 1837. During his first session in parliament he took a particular interest in the operation of the criminal law, and seconded Sir James Mackintosh's motion (2 March 1819) for a select committee. He was a member both of this committee and of another on prisons that resulted in legislation to amend the prison laws. In 1820 he

supported Mackintosh's motion to abolish the death penalty for forgery. In that year, following the deaths of his eldest son and three daughters, he moved with his wife and four remaining children from Hampstead to Cromer Hall, Norfolk.

Buxton continued his interest in legal and prison reform, and added suttee (the Indian practice of burning widows) to his humanitarian concerns. But it was in the campaign against slavery that he contributed most in his political career. He was an active member of the African Institution, founded in 1807. In May 1821 William Wilberforce, who had long led the anti-slavery group in the House of Commons, formally asked Buxton to become his partner, and then successor, in the crusade against slavery. After some thought Buxton agreed. In 1823 the Anti-Slavery Society was established by abolitionists including Wilberforce, Zachary Macaulay, Thomas Clarkson, Stephen Lushington, Buxton, and others. Buxton was appointed a vice-president of the society, whose publication was the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*. In May 1823 Buxton began the parliamentary campaign against colonial slavery by introducing a motion in the House of Commons for the gradual abolition of slavery. It was carried with the addition of some words proposed by Canning to protect planters' interests. The government issued a circular to colonial authorities, recommending ameliorative reforms, but the proposals needed the support of colonial legislatures, which was not forthcoming. An able researcher, Buxton set about collecting information about slavery and compiling demographic statistics. Public meetings were held throughout the country in denunciation of slavery and petitions were sent to parliament. On 15 April 1831, after the government had declined to take up the issue, Buxton introduced his resolution for the abolition of slavery, fortified with statistics showing a decline in the number of slaves in the West Indies from 800,000 to 700,000 between 1807 and 1830. His initiative was unsuccessful but Buxton continued to push for abolition, especially after the Jamaican slave rebellion of 1831. After the reform of parliament in 1832 the whig government carried a measure to end slavery in the colonies, though it included an apprenticeship period for freed slaves and compensation to the planters. The act received the royal assent on 23 August 1833. In spite of some forebodings, the colonial legislatures carried the act into effect, and emancipation day, 1 August 1834, passed peacefully.

Buxton subsequently concerned himself with the treatment of the aboriginal peoples in South Africa, the foreign slave trade, and the apprenticeship of ex-slaves in the West Indies under the terms of the 1833 act. On 22 March 1836 he successfully moved for a committee of the House of Commons to inquire into the apprenticeship system; his own investigations, gathering a mass of statistical data, showed that the ex-slaves had behaved well under trying circumstances. Apprenticeship was terminated on 1 August 1838, earlier than originally intended. In 1837 he founded the Aborigines' Protection Society, having chaired a select committee on Aborigines in 1835.

Buxton lost his seat at Weymouth in the general election of 1837, but declined numerous offers to stand for parliament again. He turned his attention to the suppression of the slave trade, a cause in which his daughter Priscilla Buxton assisted him, and published *The African Slave Trade* (1839) and *The Remedy* (1840), later published as one volume. His recommendations included a more efficient naval force off the coast of Africa, treaties with native chiefs, an expedition up the River Niger, and the introduction of commercial agriculture to the Niger region. The idea was to eradicate the African slave trade by substituting Christianity, civilization, and commerce. In 1839 he established the Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and the Civilisation of Africa. He persuaded the government to send a costly expedition to explore the Niger and if possible to establish commercial relations with the peoples on its banks.

Later in 1839 Buxton's health gave way and with his wife he toured Italy, where he took time to investigate prison and crime, exposed the deeds of a notorious band headed by Gasparoni, and undertook an investigation of gaols in Rome. On his return to England in 1840, Buxton took part in the planning of the Niger expedition, a venture which had the support of Prince Albert. Three iron steamers, crewmen, scientific specialists, and missionaries of the Church Missionary Society left England in 1841. In Africa the expedition encountered difficulties, and 39 of the 145 Europeans died of fever. Mortified by the failure of his plans, Buxton suffered a relapse of health. In January 1843 the Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and the Civilisation of Africa was dissolved, and at its closing meeting Buxton defended himself against charges of imprudence. In the long run the ill-fated Niger expedition might have popularized the idea of substituting legitimate commerce for the slave trade, and opened the way for British commerce in west Africa. But quinine and rapid-fire weapons proved to be more important.

Buxton's evangelical and humanitarian activities in England included his work as treasurer of the London city mission, founded in 1835, and his chairmanship of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, of which he was a benefactor. In his last years Buxton concentrated on the cultivation of his estates, and established model farms at Runton and Trimingham, near Cromer. An essay on his estate management gained the gold medal of the Royal Agricultural Society in 1845. Buxton died at his country seat, Northrepps Hall, Norfolk, on 19 February 1845, and was buried in the ruined chancel of Overstrand church. A deeply religious man, he was a member of the Church of England, though influenced by the Quaker religion of his wife and her family. He was created a baronet on 30 July 1840. Prince Albert headed a movement for a public tribute to his memory, and donations came from the West Indies and from Africa. A statue by Frederick Thrupp was commissioned and placed near the monument to Wilberforce, in the north transept of Westminster Abbey. Buxton's eldest son, Edward North Buxton, succeeded as second baronet. His third son was the politician Charles Buxton (1822–1871).

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H. P. Briggs, stipple, pubd 1835 (after W. Holl), BM, NPG

W. Holl, stipple and line print, pubd 1835 (after H. P. Briggs), NPG

B. R. Haydon, pencil study, 1840, NPG [see illus.]

B. R. Haydon, group portrait, oils, 1841 (*The Anti-slavery Society Convention, 1840*), NPG

F. Thrupp, statue, 1846, Westminster Abbey, London

J. Bell, bust, 1848, Freetown Cathedral, Sierra Leone

H. J. Robinson, stipple, 1848 (after painting by G. Richmond), NPG

J. Brain, line print (after G. Hayter), BM, NPG; repro. in J. Saunders, *Political reformers* (1840)

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See also

Anti-Slavery Society (act. 1823–1833)

Buxton [married name Johnston], Priscilla (1808–1852), slavery abolitionist

Buxton, Charles (1822–1871), politician

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