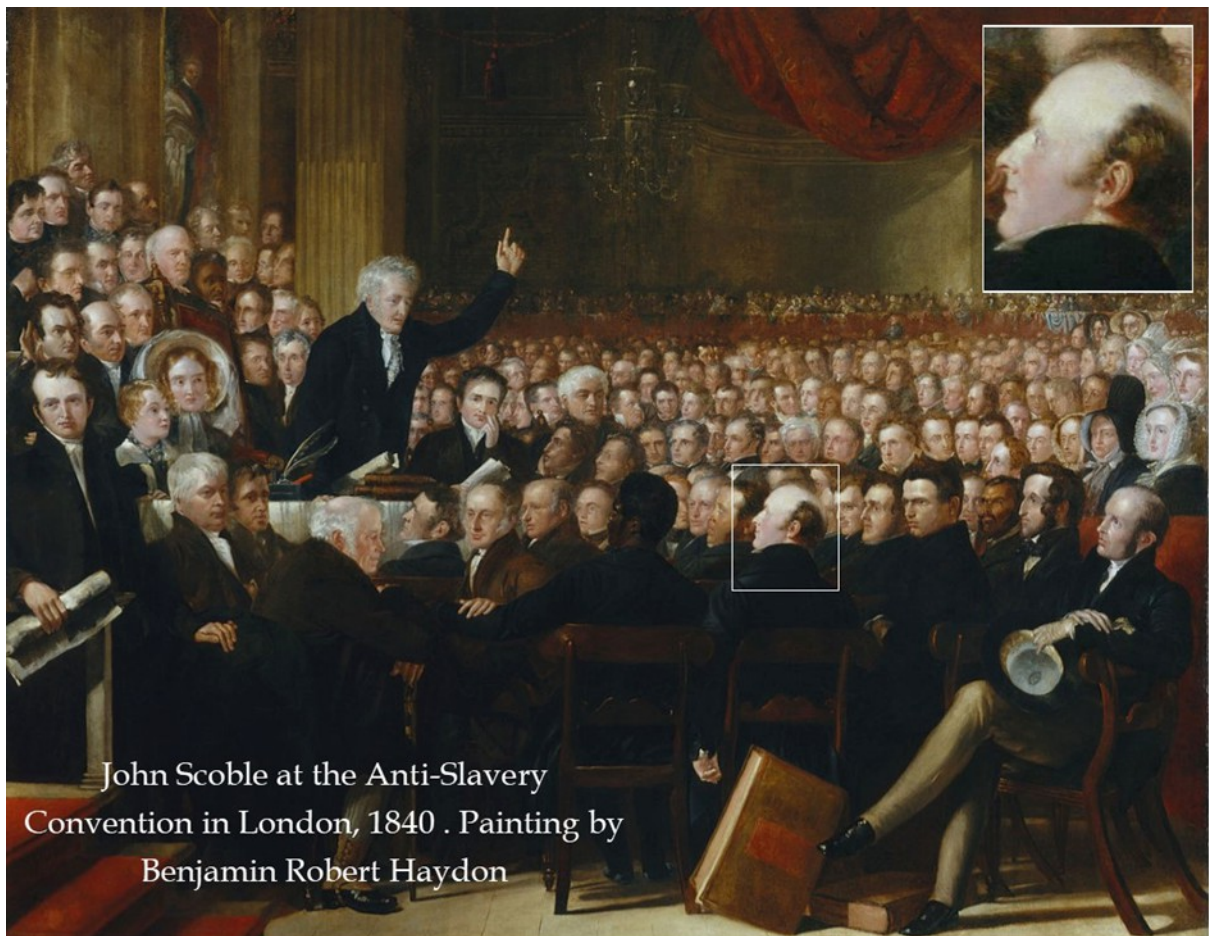


The Kingsbridge-born Anti-Slaver John Scoble

Roger Barrett



John Scoble



John Scoble at the Anti-Slavery
Convention in London, 1840 . Painting by
Benjamin Robert Haydon

The Anti-Slavery Society Convention, 1840

In view of the ongoing, nationwide campaign to remove statues associated with the slave trade, perhaps it is time for Kingsbridge to consider erecting a statue to one of its long forgotten heroes – the ardent ANTI-SLAVER John Scoble.

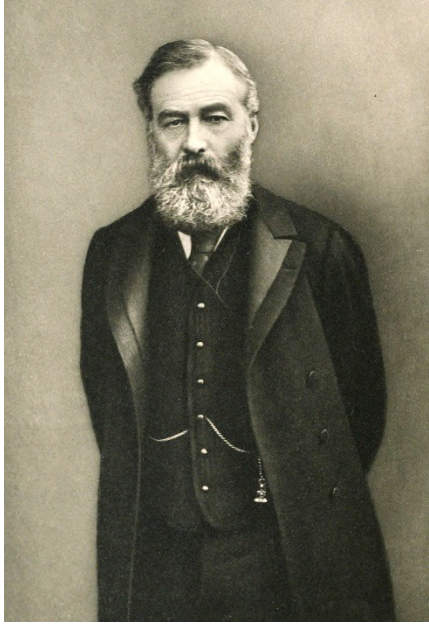
John Scoble was born in the town in January 1799 and was educated in Devon and London where he became a Congregational Minister. He became a full-time anti-slavery lecturer and helped form the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, serving as its secretary between 1842 and 1852. He played an important role in revitalizing the anti-slavery movement in France and was involved in the protests against the apprenticeship system which replaced slavery in the West Indies.

Scoble's most significant contribution, according to American historian Phillip Magness, 'may well have been his role in promoting Canada, where he settled from 1852 onward, as a place of refuge for escaped American slaves. Under the Fugitive Slave Act escaped slaves were subject to recapture even when on free state soil, hence the "Underground Railroad" actually ending in Canada where legal extradition of escaped slaves was significantly harder to obtain and routine enforcement next to impossible.'

Sarah Prideaux Fox in her book *'Kingsbridge and its Surroundings'* published in 1874 said that 'Scoble's parents were in a quite humble station. When a young boy he one day fought vigorously on Dodbrooke Quay with a boy much bigger than himself, in defence of a little fellow whom he was persecuting and ill-treating. This brought him under the notice of the child's parents, who from that time took him by the hand, and finding him very desirous of acquiring knowledge, they lent him books, and were in various ways kind and helpful to him. Step by step he rose, until he became eminent as a lecturer. Mr. Scoble long since removed to Canada, where he is, or has been, a Member of the Canadian House of Commons but until the death of his widowed mother he continued to pay occasional visits to his Kingsbridge friends.'

Scoble died in relative obscurity in Hamilton, Ontario in 1877 at the age of 79. No reference to his death has been found in the online British Newspaper Archive but the following obituary appeared in the December 28, 1877 issue of the San Francisco Bulletin:

John Scoble, a Canadian member of Parliament, died the week before last in Ontario at the age of 79. He was an Englishman, and for nearly a quarter of a century till his coming to America in 1853, was secretary of the British and foreign anti-slavery Society and an ardent co-worker with Brougham, Clarkson and Bexton. He also acted as secretary at the peace congresses of Brussels and Paris in 1849 and 1850.



One of Scoble's published works was entitled 'Slavery and the Slave Trade in British India' and it is interesting that another liberal-minded son of Kingsbridge, Sir Courtenay Ilbert (1841-1924), also sought to advance the cause of racial justice in India. Ilbert was a distinguished British lawyer and civil servant who served as legal adviser to the Viceroy of India's Council between 1882-6. In 1883 he introduced a bill which would have granted Indian judges and magistrates powers to try British offenders in criminal cases at the District level. The Ilbert Bill caused an outcry from Europeans in India and was greatly watered down. Kingsbridge has an Ilbert Road, so if we can't afford to erect a statue in these straitened

times, then John Scoble should at least have a road named after him.