

 New Creation Teaching Ministry

A Biography of John Newton

by

John Dunn

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BOYHOOD

One evening in 1731 a small boy stood alone outside the premises of a ship chandler's on Little Bear Quay in London. He was there under orders to meet with his father. Although he was only six and it was now midsummer, he was dressed like a gentleman in dark velvet breeches with buckles at the knees and yellow stockings of coarse wool. His long coat opened at the front to show a canary-coloured waistband. This rather awkward young lad was John Newton, 'the only child of Captain Newton, a respectable Master of a ship in the Mediterranean trade'.¹ John feared his father and dreaded the times when the old sailor was home from the sea.

By contrast, John's gentle and much loved mother was of Dissenting background and, although not a strong woman, gave herself almost exclusively to religious matters and the upbringing of her son.² Of an evening when her dignified husband went off to his favourite tavern, Mrs Newton would instruct John 'in the nurture and admonition of the Lord'. On the day of John Newton's visit to Little Bear Quay, he had repeated to her the devotional lessons learned that morning. He had a retentive memory and could recite, almost without fault, Dr Watts' *Preservatives from the Sins and Follies of Youth*. They were then up to lesson six, and John could answer promptly the questions put to him.

Question: What is profaneness?

Answer: 'Abusing or despising anything that is holy or that belongs to God'.

Question: What is the first instance of profaneness?

Answer: 'If I make a mock of God, or reproach His name, which is called blasphemy; or if I swear, or take the name of God in vain, or use it in a trifling manner, without seriousness'.

Question: What is the second mark of profaneness?

Answer: 'If I spend that time amiss which God has appointed for His own worship and service'.

Question: What is the third mark of profaneness?

Answer: 'If I make jest of the Word of God, or preaching, or prayer, or any part of true religion'.³

Even at this young age, John also delighted in reading and singing hymns, especially those from Isaac Watts' book: *Children's Hymns*:

Why should I join with those in play,
In whom I've no delight;
Who curse and swear but never pray;
Who call ill names and fight?

¹ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 7.

² *ibid.*, p. 10.

³ *ibid.*, p. 10–11.

I hate to hear a wanton song;
Their words offend mine ears;
I should not dare defile my tongue
With language such as theirs.

There is little doubt that Mrs Newton hoped and prayed that her young son would be numbered among the Redeemed, and that one day she might see him in clerical gown thundering a sermon from some Dissenting pulpit.¹ Little did she know what lay ahead for her dear John before that heart's desire would be realised. As it was, she never saw her prayer fulfilled for she died of consumption in 1732 when he was seven.

'John felt solemn when he realised that his mother would never come back and that his father would!'. His disciplined life of study and devotions dwindled rapidly, although he would often get alone in some quiet corner and pray 'with some earnestness'.² His father returned a year later and remarried shortly after. John was dispatched to boarding school where his life under an over-strict master was a misery. By the time he was nine or ten he had become indifferent to religion. 'At school or soon after, I had little concern about religion and easily received very ill impressions'.³

ON BOARD SHIP AT ELEVEN

John was eleven when he first went aboard his father's ship and experienced the thrill of being at sea. However, he did not live in the cramped crew's quarters below, but shared the Captain's cabin. Needless to say, he lived in constant dread and anxiety. 'I was with him in a state of fear and bondage'.⁴

During this and subsequent voyages with his father John became more and more introspective. He tried to recall the devotional studies of his mother and made his first attempts at keeping a diary, recording 'his more worthy thoughts and emotions'. At the same time he was being confronted by the curses and blasphemies of the sailors. He half understood their dirty speech, which because it was shocking could not be forgotten, yet because it was only half understood, it troubled his young imagination.⁵ His father had no comprehension of the internal battles his son was experiencing.

Two near-death incidents when he was twelve and fifteen forced John to consider the reality of God's judgment. His conscience began to suggest to him the dreadful consequences if, in such a state, he had been summoned to appear before God.⁶ He made fresh resolutions, but nothing lasted. He took up and laid aside a religious profession three or four times before he was sixteen. He wrote, 'I saw the necessity of religion as a means of escaping hell, but I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it'.⁷

OFF TO SPAIN

Meantime his father was anxious that his son be settled in some useful job that would earn him a living. The Captain had merchant friends in Spain and one of these agreed to take

¹ *ibid.*, p. 11.

² *ibid.*, p. 13.

³ *ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 2.

⁵ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 16.

⁶ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 19.

⁷ Dick Bohrer, *John Newton: Letters of a Slave Trader Freed by God's Grace*, Moody Pr., 1983, p. 10.

on John as an apprentice. It was a difficult time. Though away from his father he still cringed at every thought of his overbearing nature and, at the same time, longed for the affection of his mother. Nor did John like his foreign master forever telling him what to do and how to do it. His adolescent aggressiveness and rebellious spirit soon lost him the job, and he found himself back on board his father's vessel and off on voyages to Spain, France, Portugal, Italy and the Low Countries.

The distance between John and his father widened further. He became an ascetic, devoting all his spare time to being on his own, reading the Scriptures, meditating and praying. He set himself penances for past sins and often fasted for long periods.¹ His irritated father despaired of knowing what to do with his erratic and incomprehensible son.

FREETHINKING BEGINS

It was when Newton was about 16 that a chance reading of Lord Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* came to exercise a profound influence on his young mind. It operated on him like a slow poison. His reading led him to believe that honest doubt in religion was not the same as atheism.² He welcomed the idea that unbelief might in fact be born of intellectual integrity. It opened a new world of freedom in his thinking. It was the thin edge of the wedge that, in time, outwardly divorced him from all that he had learned from his godly mother's pious teachings. With sinful thoughts and newly-acquired sailor's oaths upon his lips he gradually gave up all considerations of a religious nature. 'Instead of prayer, I learned to curse and blaspheme'.³

FIRST VISIT TO CHATHAM

In 1742 when he was seventeen, Captain Newton arranged for John to sail to the West Indies and become involved in managing a Jamaican plantation owned by one of his business friends. It would be an adventurous life with his every need and desire met by African slaves. The pay would be good, and in four or five years he would be back home with a fortune in his pocket.⁴ A week before he was to sail, close friends of his mother, the Cartletts, invited him to visit them in Chatham. He had never met the family because there had been a falling out between them and his father after his mother's death. Nevertheless, he felt obliged to accept their invitation in consideration for the kindness they had shown to his mother when she was dying. The family welcomed him with genuine warmth and love, and he experienced an acceptance and affection such as he had not known since the loss of his mother more than ten years before.

MEETS MARY

It was in the Cartlett's home that he met Mary. She was their eldest child and almost fourteen. John had never met a girl like her. It was as if he had never seen a girl before. Yet he *had* seen many girls, though he wished a different name could be given to them to distinguish the whole species from this Unique Girl. The tavern wenches, the girls who hung around sailors near the docks at home and in Mediterranean ports, had had little appeal

¹ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, vol. 1, 1985, p. 4.

² Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 19.

³ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 18.

⁴ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 20.

to this stiff, shy boy, who for the most part ignored their occasional advances, only to have thoughts of them assail him in the wild secret imaginings of his heart.¹ *But this girl was like no other!* Virtually at first sight he felt an affection for her.² She was so beautiful, so gentle, so vivacious, so full of fun.³ How he loved being in that cheerful home, and how he loved being with *her!* And yet he was so shy, and so self-conscious, that he was struck dumb every time she came into the room. So infatuated was he with Mary Cartlett that he hardly knew how to put one sentence to another whenever she spoke to him.

He made no mention to Mary or the family of his imminent departure for Jamaica. In fact, as those first happy days passed at the Cartlett's he resolved not to go, and so stayed with them a further two weeks until he was sure that his ship had sailed. Only then did he reluctantly leave for London to face the wrath of his father! As he rode off he figured that whatever happened, at least it would not be five years before he would see Mary once again.

HIS FATHER'S ANGER

His father's anger, though short-lived, was understandable, and he finally decided to dispatch John on board a ship bound for Venice.⁴

'But Sir . . . how shall I sail?'

'Before the mast. How else? Do you expect always to share the Captain's cabin?'

' . . . Sir. You do not mean I should go as an ordinary seaman?'

' . . . I mean just that, Sir. I made a better opportunity for you and you threw it away. You have no qualifications for a higher post nor should I seek one for you if you had. Perhaps next time you will think twice before you flout my authority. Now go, Sir. And no more words on this subject. I shall ask Captain Yeats to keep an eye on you, if he can.'⁵

Being on board Yeats' ship *Dolphin* was like being in a prison. No longer the comfort and exclusion of the Captain's cabin. He was bunked in the crowded fo'c'stle with the rest of the crew where there was no escape from their coarse companionship. Very soon he began to relax his strict habits, bringing with it the inevitable twinges of conscience. Though he made some feeble effort to reform, nothing lasted and he rapidly headed towards total apostasy.⁶ *Nevertheless, he couldn't get Mary out of his mind.*

'I soon lost . . . all sense of religion, and became deaf to the remonstrances of conscience and prudence: but my regard for her was always the same; and I may, perhaps, venture to say, that none of the scenes of misery and wickedness I afterwards experienced ever banished her a single hour together from my waking thoughts for the seven years following.'⁷

He knew that the rough life of an ordinary seaman meant there was no chance of any advancement, and although Newton despaired of ever being able to present himself as an acceptable suitor for Mary, his constant thoughts of her kept his conduct somewhat in check.⁸ He dreamed of her every night, and scarcely a waking hour passed without

¹ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 20.

² John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 24.

³ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 22.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 27.

⁶ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 26.

⁷ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 6.

⁸ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 27.

conscious thoughts of her. He would rehearse over and over interminable conversations with her in which, of course, he was never at a loss for words!¹ The curious paradox of his infatuation with Mary was that, though his frustration and the seeming hopelessness of his situation left him an easy prey to lust, he did not engage in an unworthy thought concerning *her*. Nor, at this stage at least, did he allow himself to be involved with other women, though the opportunities were many. When women were smuggled on board for the crew's pleasure, Newton would escape up the mast to the crow's nest, out of reach of all but his companions' derisive laughter.²

NEWTON'S STRANGE DREAM

It was while he was on this voyage that he had an extraordinary dream that left a deep impression upon his mind. He saw himself on board ship in Venice harbour where a man handed him a valuable ring of exceptional beauty and worth. As he placed it on his finger, he was promised that so long as it was in his possession, he would be successful and happy. Should he lose it, then he would be plunged into misery and ruin. Then a second person came and began pouring scorn on his weakness and superstition for believing that a mere ring could bring such good fortune. He was seduced into throwing the ring overboard. In that instant all hell broke loose (or so it seemed in his dream) and he was overcome by deep anguish and torment. Shortly after, the first person re-appeared, questioning Newton as to the whereabouts of the ring. He immediately plunged into the water, salvaging the lost ring, and so restoring calm. But instead of returning it to him, Newton was told: 'If you should be entrusted with this ring again, you would soon bring yourself into the same distress: you are not able to keep it; but I will preserve it for you, and, whenever it is needful, will produce it on your behalf.'³

Only years later did he see the symbolism in the dream and realise the goodness of God in giving him the gift of life, which he forfeited under the seduction of Satan, then to have it restored again in Christ. His life, he later came to see, was now hid in Christ in God.

SECOND VISIT TO CHATHAM

It was a year before the ship returned to England and within days he was bound for Chatham to see his dear Mary. During his absence he had many times dreamed of ways of attaining sudden fame and fortune which might enable him to ask Mary to marry him. George Cartlett, Mary's father, was not so naïve, for he knew only too well that the wages of a common sailor were small, the occupation precarious, and few ships returned to port without the loss by accident or illness of some of the crew.⁴

Meantime, Captain Newton had found another worthwhile job prospect for his unpredictable son. But just as on his first visit to Chatham, John had become so absorbed in his companionship with Mary that he was weeks late in returning to London and the ship had sailed by the time he arrived. His father was furious and threatened to disown him.⁵ Of course he knew nothing of the real reason for his son's tardiness.

¹ *ibid.*, p. 31.

² *ibid.*, p. 30.

³ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 8.

⁴ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 25.

⁵ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 8.

THE PRESS GANG AND NAVAL SERVICE

Shipboard conditions in Newton's day were far from ideal. Merchant ships were bad enough, but the inhumane treatment that men suffered on Royal Navy ships was so bad that it was impossible for the Authorities to supply warships with volunteers. Thus the infamous 'press-gangs' were employed to force men into Naval service. The press-gangs were out looking for 'crew' to man the HMS *Harwich*, a 976 ton vessel requiring a crew of 350. John Newton was in the wrong place at the wrong time and by nightfall found himself on board a tender belonging to the *Harwich*.

For a month the young Newton, seething with resentment, endured the same fate as did the unfortunate, the idle and the wicked. He was amongst condemned criminals from England's jails who had been given the choice of hanging or serving in the Navy. He had to suffer the stench of the common sailor's quarters, ill-cooked food, the violence of desperate companions, and the tyranny of officers who considered themselves gentlemen and their crew as little better than a herd of wild animals.¹

When Captain Newton heard that his son had fallen victim to the press-gangs, he was in two minds as to what to do. On the one hand his pride was ruffled at the thought of a son of his in that state, and yet he thought it might do John some good to have to suffer the rigours of Naval life. It might knock some sense and discipline into him. In the end he relented and obtained the goodwill of the Captain of the *Harwich* to have the young Newton elevated to the quarterdeck as a midshipman.² No one was more relieved than John. Not only did he welcome his father's intervention but considered his immediate future prospects in a more hopeful light. But no sooner had his promotion been finalised than England declared war against France and the *Harwich*, with Newton on board, was assigned to convoy duty. Their route was up the East Coast to Scotland, across to Norway, Denmark, Sweden and so back to England. They had but one brief engagement with a French man-of-war, and the thunder of guns, the crash of the shot, shredding sails and falling timbers gave Newton his first experience of war.³

Newton appears to have enjoyed being a midshipman, although thoughts of Mary's companionship were never far from his mind. It was about this time that he and his friends began to embrace more vigorously Shaftesbury's philosophy that true religion must be based on nature rather than on so-called 'revelation'; that man is naturally social and good; and that orthodox religion gave an altogether false conception of God and the nature of man.⁴ The words of Watts' once-cherished hymn were now far from his mind:

Our father ate forbidden fruit,
And from his glory fell;
And we his children thus were brought
To death, and near to hell.

He was anxious to demonstrate to his fellow midshipmen that he had discarded such childish ideas inherited from his nursery schooling, and that he was now at last a genuine freethinker.⁵

¹ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, pp. 26–27.

² Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 54.

³ *ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 30.

⁵ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 64.

ANOTHER VISIT TO CHATHAM

In December 1744 Newton learned that the *Harwich* was to sail in a few weeks time to India and the East Indies and would probably be away for five years. He wanted badly to propose to Mary. He was so deeply in love, and yet so lacking in self-confidence that he tormented himself with thoughts of his own clumsiness in the society frequented by the Cartletts. He imagined Mary must look with favour on some more polished rival.¹ 'Neither reason nor self-interest could weigh in the balance with his passion for Mary and the power she had exercised over him, present or absent, since he first saw her'.²

He had just one day's leave in which to see her again. Against all common sense, he hired a horse and rode to Chatham. The visit was a disaster. Although the Cartletts received him cordially, and Mary gave him some slight encouragement, her parents were clearly unhappy about the growing romantic interest John had in their 15 year old daughter. They took him aside and well and truly told him off. In the end they forbade him either to visit again or to in any way correspond with their daughter. He must forget her and go his way.³ John was crushed, not only by her parent's prohibition, but also by Mary's apparent lukewarmness towards him. How could he face being away from England for years on end not knowing if she truly loved him?

DESERTION AND FLOGGING

In desperation he jumped ship and deserted. Within days he was recaptured and returned to the *Harwich*, not as a midshipman, but as a felon to await punishment. He was placed in irons and confined below decks.⁴ In the foul, cold air he was left handcuffed in pitch darkness to contemplate his unknown fate. He dreaded the thought that he had now forfeited all hope of Mary's love. His recriminations brought him to the border of madness. He who had craved only to love and to be loved by one person, was now pent up in the darkness, hated and outcast. With the exception of his beloved, he now burned with hatred to everyone.⁵

Two days later, the morning before sailing from Plymouth, all 350 of the crew was assembled on deck to witness Newton's court martial and flogging. The Captain was determined to make an example of him, and so discourage any other malcontents from thoughts of desertion. He was stripped and lashed to a grating. 'Give him the first dozen.' The cat-o'-nine-tails swung, repeatedly lashing his bare back until his white skin was red with lacerated flesh. His audience watched in sickened silence. One young marine fainted. Lash after lash pounded his torn back. Eight dozen strokes in all. He was determined not to give any evidence of his excruciating pain. If this were for Mary, if he was bearing this to keep *her* from pain, then he would endure. In a way it was for her that he had incurred it. 'Mary, Mary, Mary,' he breathed her name with every blow until he was near to unconsciousness.⁶

Stripped of rank and degraded to his original position, his former comrades now dared not even acknowledge that they had ever known him, and were forbidden by the Captain to have any communication with him.⁷

¹ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 30.

² Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 66.

³ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 32.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, pp. 84–85.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 88.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 90.

There is no doubt that the disgrace and humiliation of this experience dramatically changed Newton. He was filled with rage against the Captain and contemplated murdering him and of then throwing himself overboard. His hatred and anger at the crew festered and grew, and with it came a deep despair. Nothing distressed him more than the thought of being forcibly torn away from the one object of his affection, Mary Cartlett. He would probably never see her again, and even if he did, news of his desertion and flogging would not endear him to her, let alone to her parents!

‘Yet nothing I either felt or feared distressed me so much as to see myself thus forcibly torn away from the object of my affections, under such a great improbability of seeing her again . . . My breast was filled with the most excruciating passions; eager desire, bitter rage and black despair . . . inward or outward I could perceive nothing but darkness and misery . . . I cannot express with what wishfulness and regret I cast my last looks upon the English shore.’¹

Although Newton did not altogether abandon conventional morality, he now gave himself fully to the intellectual conversion to Freethinking from what he no doubt saw as ‘the superstitions of religion’. Even so, thoughts of Mary were still in his mind, and *for her sake* he endured insults and mounting hardship, never putting into action his designs upon the Captain, or of suicide. He could not bear the thought that she would think badly of him when he was dead.² As he put it: ‘The secret hand of God restrained me.’³

BACK ON A MERCHANT SHIP

Nineteen days after sailing, they encountered a Guinea merchant ship with two experienced men on board which the Captain of the *Harwich* wanted to exchange for two of his ordinary seamen. In a flash Newton realised that, whereas he could not face five years to India and back, he *could* endure a year’s voyage to Africa. He pleaded to be discharged, and within the hour was rowing out of the Royal Navy to the new vessel—and so back into merchant service.⁴

Newton was now amongst strangers who knew nothing of his pious past, nor of his desertion and flogging. A new life of liberty to think and live as he pleased lay before him. He was free, and so suddenly free that there could be no sobriety, no moderation in his considerations of his freedom; free from the scenes of his captivity and disgrace; free from the comrades of his prosperity and misery; free from the particular bondage which made him the victim of every vicious whim and from the general discipline against which he had chafed; free from the lengthy nightmare absence from England; free for the shorter voyage he had craved. He was now free of his past. Free from all taboos; free from the superstitious fears and religious beliefs that had shackled him since boyhood. Now at last he was free to do what he liked without restraint.⁵

Not until he was on board the new vessel, did Newton realise that its Captain and crew were engaged in the slave trade between Africa and the West Indies. However, compared with the harsh discipline and evil company of the *Harwich*, John Newton found life on the Guinea trader very much to his liking.

¹ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 11.

² Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 95.

³ Dick Bohrer, *John Newton: Letters of a Slave Trader Freed by God’s Grace*, Moody Pr., 1983, p. 23

⁴ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 37.

⁵ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 98.

AFRICA AND THE SLAVE TRADE

During the voyage to Sierra Leone Newton very soon left his mark as one who was careless, insubordinate, foul-mouthed and no respecter of morality. He especially derived great pleasure from poking fun at religion. His determination to live as a Freethinker led him into a devil-may-care attitude that had no restraint on any sin that came to mind, and he made it his habit to tempt and seduce others to his way of life. He had a talent for composing ribald verse, and directed one such offensive ballad to his incensed Captain. Years later he confessed that he sinned with a high hand and that he was, ‘. . . abandoned as I pleased, without any controul; and, from this time, I was exceedingly vile . . . I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion.’¹

On board ship he became friends with a resident trader from West Africa named Amos Clow. This wealthy self-made man impressed Newton, and he soon got the idea into his head to follow in his steps. If only he could settle somewhere ashore and follow Clow’s example, he might in a year or two return to England with a fortune, marry Mary Cartlett, and quit the sea for ever.² He begged Clow to take him with him, and so, with his discharge arranged, Newton found himself ashore on an island off the coast of Guinea in the middle of the iniquitous slave trade.

Newton, Clow and his black native mistress, were virtually the only people on this small island. Clow immediately set him to work building a house, though he refused to pay Newton any wage for all his hard work. Clow’s lady P.I. (as she was called) had no liking for Newton, and viewed him with suspicion and hostility. The combination of climate and hard manual labour soon took its toll and the nineteen year old succumbed to fever. Newton was too ill to accompany Clow on his next trip, and was left in P.I.’s care. Far from looking after him, she virtually left him to die.³

‘I had sometimes not a little difficulty to procure a draught of water when burning with fever. My bed was a mat spread upon a board or chest, and a log of wood for my pillow . . . She lived in plenty herself, but hardly allowed me sufficient to sustain life, except now and then, when in the highest good humour, she would send me victuals in her own plate after she had dined . . .’⁴

Newton’s hunger was at times so great that, in spite of his abject weakness, he would crawl out into the plantation under the cover of darkness to find grass roots for food.⁵ These hardly sufficed, and had not some of the chained black slaves taken pity on him and secretly given him food of their own, he would certainly have died well before Clow’s return.⁶

A SLAVE OF THE SLAVE TRADER

The further inland Guinea traders ventured, the cheaper they could obtain their slaves. To this end, Clow used a small vessel to navigate upstream on the mainland rivers. His next expedition was due and he considered Newton recovered enough to accompany him. At

¹ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 13.

² Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 113.

³ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 43.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵ Dick Bohrer, *John Newton: Letters of a Slave Trader Freed by God’s Grace*, Moody Pr., 1983, p. 34.

⁶ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 51.

first all went well, but as the little boat made its way upriver they encountered a rival European trader who managed to accuse Newton of stealing from Clow. Clow was stupid enough to believe him. From then on, he would not leave the ship without first chaining Newton to the deck, leaving him to suffer the maddening desolation of captivity.¹ He would be left for days on end exposed to the elements and without adequate food or water. He would suffer the blistering heat of the unrelenting sun only to be lashed hours later by the chilling gales of a storm. He was often left soaked and starved and numb from the cold.² He would have starved to death several times had he not been able to catch a few fish with a makeshift line.³ The experience broke his constitution as well as his spirit and he lost all resolution and almost all reflection on life.⁴

Somehow, still weak from his fever, Newton survived those two months upriver. But he was now, in every sense of the word, just another of Clow's chattels. His situation was hopeless. There was no escape and no hope of improvement. For a year he worked on Clow's plantation as much a slave as any Negro.⁵ With his tattered clothes and shameful occupation, he dreaded ever being seen by any of his fellow countrymen, and if a ship happened to pass, or men came ashore for supplies, he would hide among the trees.⁶ Under the cover of darkness he would sneak out to wash his only shirt upon the rocks, and then let it dry on his back while he slept.⁷ He described himself at this time as 'depressed to a degree beyond common wretchedness'.⁸

NEWTON'S NEW MASTER

Clow eventually released Newton to a neighbouring trader who offered to employ him. Under his new master Newton found a renewed freedom and some return to dignity and self-worth. But he had become deeply interested in some of the African superstitions including moon worship and actually came to believe that it was unsafe to sleep when the moon was visible. He viewed himself as being in Satan's service and thought it 'luck' that had preserved him when he survived an attack by a lioness or when someone found an adder coiled in his pallet.⁹ By the time he was twenty-two, Newton had already begun to take on elements of the pagan culture of those amongst whom he now lived, assuming some of their fetishes and taboos, charms and divinations.¹⁰ In a strange way he began to think himself a happy man,¹¹ though of course, not as happy as he knew he would be if he was with his dear Mary. But he observed later, 'I entered into closer engagements with the inhabitants, and should have lived and died a wretch among them, if the Lord had not watched over me for good.'¹²

¹ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 136.

² *ibid.*, p. 137.

³ Dick Bohrer, *John Newton: Letters of a Slave Trader Freed by God's Grace*, Moody Pr., 1983, p. 35.

⁴ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 18.

⁵ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 45.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 45.

⁷ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 19.

⁸ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 45.

⁹ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 147.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 149.

¹¹ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 20.

¹² John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 59.

RESCUED BY HIS FATHER

In February 1747 men came ashore from a passing ship inquiring of the locals, 'Have you heard of a white man named John Newton?' They were there on behalf of his father. Faced with this sudden chance to go home, Newton hesitated. More than anything else he wanted to be in England with his Mary. But what use would that be? His depraved condition was less than that of the slaves. He was in deep poverty and had nothing to offer her. He might as well stay put. 'Make up your mind,' urged the impatient Captain. 'Besides', he lied, 'one of your relatives has died and left you four hundred pounds a year.'¹ Newton could hardly believe his ears! Four hundred pounds! Although he could not imagine who of his relatives would have that much money to leave him, he needed no further persuasion and immediately boarded ship for the twelve-month voyage back to England via Brazil and Newfoundland.

NEWTON'S PROFANITY

Newton had no responsibilities on board *The Greyhound* and, when he was not on shore hunting and carousing, often engaged in drinking orgies with some of the crew.² It was during one of these drinking bouts that he almost lost his life by trying to jump overboard to rescue his favourite hat.³ He read a little, and sometimes composed poems to his Mary, but his main hobby was inventing new forms of blasphemy. These were not the normal curses and swearing of a rough seaman, but carefully thought out expressions of revolt against the very idea of God:

'I had no business to employ my thoughts . . . my whole life, when awake, was a course of most horrid impiety and profaneness. I know not that I have ever since met so daring a blasphemer. Not content with common oaths and imprecations, I daily invented new ones.'⁴

The Captain, who was a hardened seaman but with no strong religious convictions, was so appalled by Newton's dreadful language that he begged him to desist.

After nine days of sailing before a hard gale in the North Atlantic, Newton came across a copy of Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*. For some reason he picked it up and began to read:

Since Life is of short and uncertain Continuance, it highly concerns you to look about you, and take good heed how you employ it. O the Hardness of Men's Hearts! O the wretched Stupidity! that fixes their whole Thoughts and Care upon the present . . . whereas in truth, every Work, and Word, and Thought, ought to be so ordered, as if it were to be our Last; and we instantly to Die, and render an Account of it.⁵

Newton mused: '*What if these things should be true!*'⁶ Alarmed by its words as well as his reaction to what he read, he angrily threw the book aside. No! he was a Freethinker and he would live with the consequences. But, as he later wrote, '*. . . the Lord's time was come, and the conviction I was so unwilling to receive was deeply impressed upon me by an awful dispensation.*'⁷

¹ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 159.

² *ibid.*, p. 161.

³ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 23.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 51.

⁶ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 25.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 25.

THE GREAT STORM

The very next night, on the 10th March 1748, the whole ship's company was suddenly jolted awake as a violent storm descended upon them. Wave after wave pounded the vessel smashing the sides, tearing the rigging and filling the hold with water. 'She's sinking!', went up the urgent cry.¹ The pumps could not keep the water from rising and Newton joined a dozen of the crew in the hopeless task of bailing with buckets. Hour after hour they battled. Some of the crew were washed overboard as was all the livestock and much of the cargo. At dawn the wind abated somewhat and there was frantic activity to plug the leaks and continue bailing, but all hope was lost of them surviving. Then an important thing happened to Newton:

'About nine o'clock, being almost spent with cold and labor, I went to speak to the captain, who was busied elsewhere. As I was returning from him, I said, almost without meaning, 'If this will not do, the Lord have mercy on us.' This (though spoken with little reflection) was the first desire I had breathed for mercy for many years.'²

As he staggered back to the pumps he was instantly struck with his own words. 'Why did I say that? I didn't intend to say it. It said itself. The Lord—I've said that or some such name a hundred times a day.'³ But this was different. It was not blasphemy or ridicule. It was not intentional. It just happened. Anyway, would the Lord have mercy on the ship, upon the crew and upon him? If, indeed there was a God, a father of mankind who showed mercy, as the Christians affirmed, what mercy could there be for such a blasphemer as John Newton? He must think this out afresh.

For days the bad weather continued, but somehow the ship remained afloat. Finally they were free from water but by no means out of danger. The rigging was badly damaged with many of the sails in tatters. They had no idea where they were and only had food for another seven days. Meantime, Newton's mind was racing. Though he could not explain or understand what was happening, he suddenly knew that he was not alone.⁴ He was convinced that his sins were too great to be forgiven, and his excellent memory was now recalling some terrifying Scriptures learned in childhood:⁵

Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, and you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you, when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, would have none of my counsel, and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices.

Day after day he took his turn at the helm, sometimes for eleven hours at a time, steering the frail ship through the mountainous waves. All the time he was re-examining what he believed. Amazingly these Scriptures did not crush him, and he tentatively began to pray. He wanted evidence that God was real. He wanted faith. He wanted assurance that the Scriptures were of Divine inspiration. He wanted to be able to exercise trust and hope in God. As yet he could not do so.⁶

¹ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 169.

² John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 71.

³ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 172.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 73.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 74.

LAND SIGHTED!

On the sixth day land was sighted! It had to be Ireland. Out came the last of their food in celebration. But within a few hours the frustrated crew found themselves becalmed, and the clouds they thought were land passed away.¹ Then the weather changed. Another gale bore down upon them and blew them off their desired course. It raged on, and again, all hope was lost of the ship and crew surviving. They now had the terrible prospect of either starving to death or being reduced to feeding on one another.² No wonder the Captain and crew began to think of Newton as a Jonah. This blasphemer must surely be the sole cause of their incredible bad luck. ‘Throw him over-board,’ some demanded. Fortunately for Newton, the Captain was not willing to find out if his blasphemous young passenger was indeed the cause of their troubles.³ Nevertheless, this constant accusation by the Captain left Newton feeling decidedly uncomfortable:

‘... the continued repetition of this in my ears... gave me much uneasiness; especially as my conscience seconded his words: I thought it very probable, that all that had befallen us was on my account; that I was at last found out by the powerful hand of God, and condemned in my own breast.’⁴

What no one realised was that, from the moment of his spontaneous prayer during the height of the storm, Newton had stopped swearing. He had not determined it. It just happened. He simply stopped.⁵ In fact, the words of the Scriptures were now burning into him: ‘*If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children; how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?*’ He reasoned:

‘If this book is true, the promise in this passage is true likewise. I have need of that very Spirit by which the whole was written, in order to understand it. He has promised here to give that Spirit to those who ask, I must therefore pray, and if it is of God, He will make good his own word.’⁶

ON LAND AND NEW RESOLVES

For almost a month they drifted helplessly. Finally the damaged ship and starving crew made land on the north of Ireland. Within two hours of reaching the harbour, a violent storm arose such that, had they been still at sea, the ship would have certainly sunk. None were more aware of the providence and kindness of God than Newton. It was no longer a question: ‘Is there a God?’ but, ‘What is God like? How may I truly know Him?’ Was the prodigal at last on his way home?

Newton reflected long and hard on all that had happened. He began to realise that no temporal dispensations could have reached his heart unless the Lord had applied them. He saw that he was the most unlikely person on that ship to have received an impression of the reality and providence of God. No one else of the whole crew had been so impressed by what happened. Nor could he see any reason why the Lord had singled him out for such outstanding mercy.⁷ By the end of his stay in Northern Ireland, Newton had become what he called ‘a serious professor’.

¹ *ibid.*, p. 77.

² *ibid.*, p. 78.

³ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 56.

⁴ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 31.

⁵ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 183.

⁶ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 74.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 80.

'I stood in need of an Almighty Saviour, and such an one I found described in the New Testament. The Lord had wrought a marvellous thing: I was no longer an infidel. I heartily renounced my former profaneness, I had taken up some right notions, was seriously disposed, and sincerely touched with a sense of the undeserved mercy in being brought safely through so many dangers; I was sorry for my past misspent life, and purposed an immediate reformation; I was freed from the habit of swearing which seemed to have been deeply rooted in me as a second nature. To all appearances, I was a new man.

I cannot doubt that this change, so far as it prevailed, was wrought by the Spirit and power of God, yet I was greatly deficient in many respects. In some degree, I sensed my more enormous sins, but I was little aware of the innate evils of my heart . . . *I acknowledged the Lord's mercy in pardoning what was past, but depended chiefly upon my own resolutions to do better for the time to come . . . my strength was no more than my righteousness . . . I learnt . . . here a little, and there a little, by my own painful experience . . . From this period I could no more make a mock of sin, or jest with holy things; I no more questioned the truth of Scripture, or quenched the rebukes of conscience . . . but I cannot consider myself to have been a believer in the full sense of the word till a considerable time afterward.*¹

Back on land Newton's thoughts very soon turned to hopes of seeing Mary. But he was deeply apprehensive. He dared not visit Chatham after the previous unhappy episode and so he wrote to one of Mary's aunts pleading with her for news; was Mary alive and well? Was she still unmarried? He hoped for a reply by the time he arrived in Liverpool. He also wrote to his father telling him, not only of his adventures, but of his love for Mary Cartlett. Captain Newton had long since assumed that his son had perished in the *Greyhound* and the arrival of the letter deeply moved him. Not only did he reply to John in most affectionate terms, but, unknown to Newton, found time to visit the Cartletts to speak to them about Mary on his behalf.²

LETTER FROM MARY'S AUNT

The reply from Mary's aunt told him all that he wanted to know, and more. By now his father had left for Canada to take up an appointment as Governor of the Hudson Bay Company. But before his departure he had visited Chatham and given his consent should the two young people wish to marry. Newton could hardly contain his joy, and without delay boarded the first coach for London and then hired a horse and headed for Chatham. When he saw Mary he melted. With his heart beating wildly, he tried to utter the ardent words of love that he had rehearsed all the way from Liverpool.³ But he was tongue-tied and scarcely dared look at her. Every attempt by the shy and bashful young sailor to speak his mind was a disaster. Mary was clearly disappointed, and John left for Liverpool, and a new posting, humiliated and distressed by his feeble and bumbling performance. But he would write to her. He could say things in letters that he seemed incapable of saying to her face. And write he did. Long, involved, flowery letters. Although Newton wrote often, Mary replied but once. Her answer, though cautious, satisfied him. She was not attached to anyone else and was willing to wait for him until the end of the new voyage.⁴

NEWTON'S DECLENSION AND CONVERSION

Newton, now twenty-three, had been offered the position of mate aboard the *Brownlow*, a slave trader from Guinea and it was not long before he fell into many of his old ways. In particular he succumbed to all his old lusts:⁵

¹ *ibid.*, p. 82–83.

² Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 60.

³ *ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴ Dick Bohrer, *John Newton: Letters of a Slave Trader Freed by God's Grace*, Moody Pr., 1983, p. 68.

⁵ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 217.

‘Who would not expect to hear, that after such a wonderful, unhopd for deliverance as I had received, and after my eyes were in some measure enlightened to see things aright, I should immediately cleave to the Lord and His ways with purpose of heart, and consult no more with flesh and blood?

Alas! It was far otherwise with me.’¹

By the time he arrived back at the same island where he had been a slave to Clow, he was, profanity excepted, almost as bad as before. He seemed to have forgotten all the Lord’s mercies and was unaware that sin first deceives and then it hardens. He was back in chains with little desire and no power to free himself.²

Again he went down with fever. But it was during this time, weak and almost delirious, that he resolved to cast himself upon the Lord as never before, *to have Him to do with him as He should please*.³ As he lay prostrate, slowly but clearly there came to him a sight of Calvary. He began to see and understand what happened on the Cross as he had never known it before. The dying agony of the Saviour and His vicarious suffering was there before him, and he suddenly knew that it was his sin—John Newton’s sin—that had necessitated Christ’s death.⁴ Ever since the storm, Newton had considered God to be a righteous judge who would remit punishment if he could but give satisfaction. But now, he saw that God was the great Giver! He has given His one and only Son. As this sight burst upon him he was suddenly free from all his old legalistic efforts to appease an angry God. He knew he was forgiven. He knew he was a justified man. He knew that he belonged to Christ. Over the course of several days his burden of conscience was entirely removed and both peace and health were restored.⁵ He later wrote:

‘I mark that day as the turning point in my spiritual experience. I came into the good of being delivered from the power and domination of sin—even though I still, to this day, “groan, being burdened” with the effects and ever-present conflicts of my sin nature.’⁶

During the eight months the *Brownlow* was away, Newton was often aware of the Providence of God, narrowly escaping death several times. There was one odd circumstance when he was about to go ashore in the longboat with a team of men to collect water and fire wood. The Captain called him back: ‘I’ve taken it into my head to send someone else in your place.’ That night the longboat sank in the river, and all but one, including the man who had taken Newton’s place, were drowned. Newton himself had never learned to swim.⁷

His return to England was via Charlestown where the slaves were unloaded. It was here, in 1740, that young George Whitefield had visited and preached with great effectiveness. Whitefield had recently visited again, and much of Charlestown was gripped by ‘religious concern’. Although Newton was intrigued by what he saw and heard, he still had very little grasp of the heart of the Gospel. Although he would walk in the woods and fields and commune with God in prayer and praise⁸, his conduct was still very inconsistent.

‘I frequently spent the evenings in vain and worthless company. My relish for worldly diversions was much weakened, and I was more a spectator than a sharer in their pleasures, but I did not as yet see the necessity of separation . . . the Lord was pleased to preserve me from what I *knew* was sinful. I had for the most part peace of conscience, and my strongest desires were towards the things of God.’⁹

¹ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 90.

² *ibid.*, p. 91.

³ *ibid.*, p. 92.

⁴ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 220.

⁵ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 92.

⁶ Dick Bohrer, *John Newton: Letters of a Slave Trader Freed by God’s Grace*, Moody Pr., 1983, p. 73–74.

⁷ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 224.

⁸ Dick Bohrer, *John Newton: Letters of a Slave Trader Freed by God’s Grace*, Moody Pr., 1983, p. 78.

⁹ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 97.

While in Charlestown Newton saw that, as a result of Whitefield's preaching, attempts were being made to improve the conditions of the slaves, and many had clearly come into the Christian faith and been baptised.¹ Such a possibility would not have occurred to him prior to this trip.

PROPOSAL AND MARRIAGE

On his return to England, Newton was promised the captaincy of a ship for his next voyage. He wasted no time in visiting Chatham where he was determined to propose to Mary. 'My heart was so full it beat and trembled to that degree that I knew not how to get a word out. I sat stupid and speechless for some minutes.'²

When at last he began to speak, Mary, with a swift change of mood, said quite firmly: 'I can't marry you and you must not mention the subject again.' Not put off, John tried again, and once more she forbade him to speak of such things. A third time he spoke his mind, only to be told that 'he was much too good for her'. John now pressed upon her his passionate love for her, until finally she gave her hand in consent. A fortnight later, in February 1750, they were married at St Margaret's, Rochester.³

CAPTAIN OF THE DUKE OF ARGYLE

It was six months before Newton could set sail as Captain of the *Duke of Argyle*. It was a worrying time with little or no money to support his young wife. As was the custom in his day, he gambled often, and stopped only when he realised how much in debt he had become.⁴ His love for Mary took precedence over all else, and in the ensuing months he came to so rest in the gift that he almost completely forgot the Giver.⁵ It was an 'excessive affection' (as he called it) that was to characterise the remainder of his life with Mary.

Meantime Newton was anxious to refute the arguments of the Freethinkers and to take his stand as a Christian. He wrote to all who would listen to his views, even though he was still confused about many issues concerning Christian doctrine.⁶ This was the beginning of his prolific letter writing ministry for which he was later to become famous.

With his new Captaincy Newton commenced a journal. It was the earliest known document recording details of the slave trade, and contains minute information about the hard conditions on board ship; near insurrections from the slaves; the Captain's tough handling of the crew under extremely difficult circumstances; his attempts to conduct Sunday worship; and of his problems associated with trying to make an honest living when virtually all his competitors were utterly unscrupulous. There is little evidence of Newton showing (at this stage) much compassion towards the slaves, although he did write from Africa, 'This unhappy country . . . these poor creatures . . . the least pleasing part of my life is such as still to leave room to pity millions of my fellow creatures.'⁷

He also prayed that the Lord might deliver him from the necessity of such an occupation and give him 'a more humane calling'.⁸

¹ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 69.

² *ibid.*, p. 71.

³ *ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 241.

⁵ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 99.

⁶ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 75.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 110.

⁸ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 253.

It is hard for us to look back 250 years and realise that Newton lived in harsh times when every English village still had its whipping post. In his day and age slave trading was considered to be a 'genteel employment', and traders, even Christians, looked on their cargo just as they might so much cattle. They valued them by height and physique, entering them in the ledger alongside accounts of elephant's tusks, pineapples and hardwood.

John wrote to Mary every day even though he believed many of these letters would never arrive at their destination. In fact not one was lost. Mail from her was much more infrequent and he sometimes received her correspondence up to six months after it was written, and then only after it had come to him via six or seven different vessels.¹ John had no one with whom to share his constant pain at being separated from his beloved, and he would walk the decks at night 'commending her to God's care and protection'. For Mary's part, she missed her husband deeply and hardly knew how to occupy her time with constant worrying over his welfare. His letters, although welcome, were tedious, on all sorts of subjects and often difficult to follow.² But as he gained a more accurate knowledge of the truth, his letters became more serious and purposeful.

By the time Newton arrived back in England in November 1751, almost half his crew had died. Many of the slaves never made it to the North American colony and the voyage was hardly considered a financially successful one. The *Duke of Argyle*, battered and worn out, was declared unseaworthy and a new ship, the *African*, was promised to the young Captain.

CAPTAIN OF THE AFRICAN

His first voyage on the *African*, in 1752, was filled with trouble. There were numerous insurrections among the slaves and many died or committed suicide. A number of his crew deserted and several others had to be put in chains until they could be transferred to another ship. There was a time when he thought he was dying of fever. He declared that he wanted to live 'for Mary's sake' and, since his 'former wretched apostasy' was known to hundreds, wanted to show at least as many how he had changed to God's glory.³

News of Mary was scarce, and at one stage Newton became convinced that the long silence could only mean that she had died. He was frantic with anxiety. He was especially terrified that she might die in childbirth, and for that reason, was determined never to have children. He wrote, fearing it was too late:

'What a striking lesson! . . . cut off in the first year of marriage! I think it probable that she died in childbed. Alas! the vanity of this world and all its enjoyments! . . . I hope I shall always be contented and pleased, if it should please God that you never have to consider myself as the immediate, though innocent, cause of your death! I own that children, from the consideration of their being yours, would be highly acceptable to me, if it were so appointed; but I hope I shall never be so mad as to wish for them, for fear the consequence should ruin me. I know I am already happy without them.'⁴

He was convinced that his own idolatrous heart was its own punishment. With no news of Mary he lost his appetite, had pains in his stomach, and suffered an imaginary stroke.⁵ However, he wrote in his diary:

¹ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 86.

² *ibid.*, p. 87.

³ *ibid.*, p. 102.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 99.

⁵ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, pp. 43–44.

'my complaint was not all grief; conscience had a share. I thought my unfaithfulness to God had deprived me of her, especially my backwardness in speaking of spiritual things, which I could hardly attempt, even to her.'¹

HIS LAST VOYAGE

Newton made one more voyage in the interests of the slave trade. It was an important trip due to two quite different events. He had on board an old colleague who had sailed with him years before. This young man once held to strong religious convictions. Newton had so ridiculed him that he succeeded in turning him into an infidel. He now set about 'to repair the mischief he had done to him'. He used every argument to try and dissuade him from his atheism. All to no avail, 'He was exceedingly profane, and grew worse and worse. I saw in him a lively picture of what I had once been; it was very inconvenient to have it always before my eyes.'²

What was worse, the man was not only deaf to all Newton's efforts to persuade him concerning the truth of the Gospel, but he did all in his power to counteract the Captain's good influences on others. Eventually, for the sake of the ship's safety, Newton was obliged to have him transferred to another vessel. The man died a dreadful death shortly after, still a convinced unbeliever, leaving Newton deeply affected.

The second event was Newton's meeting of a Christian captain during a lay-over at the island of St Christopher in the West Indies. Captain Clunie was a man of some experience in the things of God: the first such person Newton had ever met. Up to then he had not been able to find anyone who could answer his many questions nor instruct him more closely in the great doctrines of Scripture. So far he had been entirely self-taught.

'For nearly a month we spent every evening together on board each other's ship alternately, and often prolonged our visits till towards daybreak. I was all ear; he not only increased my understanding, but his teaching warmed my heart . . . I began to understand the security of the covenant of grace, and to expect to be preserved, not by my own power and holiness, but by the mighty power and promise of God, through faith in the unchangeable Saviour.'³

He returned to England full of joy and hope in the Lord. For the first time since his conversion his great fear of relapsing into his former apostasy was gone. He was a free man.

Newton was about to embark again from Liverpool, when, in November 1754, he suffered a mysterious seizure. He was advised not to sail again, and resigned his commission the day before he was due to leave.⁴ He never went to sea again.

NEW LIFE ON LAND

During his last voyage Newton had made a renewed effort to be more disciplined in his own personal devotions and in his meditations upon the things of God. He began a personal diary in which he drew up rules and regulations to govern his spiritual conduct. He resolved to sleep no more than seven hours a night and rise early for at least one hour of private devotions and Bible reading before breakfast.⁵

¹ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 108.

² *ibid.*, p. 111.

³ *ibid.*, p. 114.

⁴ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 101.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 104.

With no immediate prospects of further work, Newton spent most of his time at Chatham, often walking in the woods and meditating on eternal issues. He now had more opportunity to discuss with friends his perplexities concerning finer points of doctrine, and began attending local churches, both Established and Dissenting, in order to learn and be taught the truth. He was often deeply disappointed by what he heard. Nevertheless he rejoiced in what he knew the Lord had done and was continuing to do in his life:

‘The Lord has caus’d more of his goodness to pass before me than I ever before experienc’d. I hope particularly he has taken me more off my own bottom . . . and made me more willing to depend upon his righteousness only.’¹

MEETING WITH WHITEFIELD

Newton had been reading some of the letters published by George Whitefield and John Wesley, which he said ‘led me to adore the free grace of God in them.’ Two of his London friends invited him to visit Whitefield and the encounter left a lasting impression. The next day he went to hear him preach at 5 a.m.

‘Rose at 4 and after private prayer went to ye Tabernacle, was admitted upon producing ye ticket and here indeed I had a blessing: there were about 1000 or more people of different persuasions but all agreed in ye great essentials of ye Gospel and in mutual charity, worshipping the Lord with one heart and soul. Never before had I such an idea and foretaste of ye business of heaven . . . we were about 3 hours in ye ordinance, at the end I went away rejoicing.’²

The next evening he went back again to hear Whitefield, ‘A prodigious multitude of people so that besides those who stayed in the yard, many hundreds were forc’d to go away, the place is suppos’d to contain 5000’.

Newton went morning after morning to hear Whitefield. It was shortly after this that he wrote in his diary:

‘I have greatly wasted time and given in to unnecessary and *unsuitable* indulgence . . . sure all the dark parts of ye 7th Romans belongs in an eminent manner to me . . . If notwithstanding all my vileness I am made free from sin by the spirit of Life in Christ Jesus, what a wonderful instance I am, both of the riches and the freedom of Grace.’³

However, every time he attempted to share publicly or privately with others the joy of his new-found freedom in Christ, he was tongue-tied.

TIDE SURVEYOR

Newton jumped at an offer of a job in Liverpool as tide surveyor, and he commenced there in August 1755. But he was worried about Mary’s poor health. She had become chronically ill the day he had had his fit. He knew that he idolised her, and prayed:

‘Thou art God and not man . . . And even as I pray, I know how much this praying differs from the cold wandering thoughts of mine which often pass for prayer and praise. I know, too, that separation must come sometime. But, gracious God, not yet. She has been my idol, I confess. Yet Thou hast so ordained that if I had not loved her, I should not have been brought to Thy love. I speak as a fool. Thou

¹ *ibid.*, p. 105.

² *ibid.*, p. 106.

³ *ibid.*, p. 108.

knowest my weakness. Give me grace to bear whatever thou seest fit to send in love. But, I pray, lay not my sin to her charge. Abate her pain. Strengthen her, comfort her as I cannot, my dear, my dearest . . . Enable us both to say: Thy will be done.’¹

Newton hated leaving her while she was so seriously ill, and it was five months before she was able to join him in their little cottage in Liverpool.

The customs service in which Newton was engaged brought to him new trials and temptations. Smuggling was common and widely accepted. The custom’s officers were often a party to the trade knowing that they could receive worthwhile gratuities on the side. At first he took part in the practice, but then wrote, ‘began to reap some of the profits of my new office and to my grief and surprise found too much of the love of money, which is the root of all evil, spring up in my heart.’²

In his day no one thought such a practice was wrong, and even many Christians, including clergy, openly employed their own smugglers for financial gain. Newton finally determined to have no further part in such dealings.

WHITEFIELD IN LIVERPOOL

In September 1755 George Whitefield visited Liverpool. Newton had never forgotten his first encounters with the evangelist and eagerly joined the 4000 or so who had gathered at 5 a.m. to hear him preach. Later in the day the two met and talked for more than two hours. Newton went to hear Whitefield preach again that evening, and afterwards, was invited to have supper with him to engage in further ‘close conversation’ on the things of the Kingdom.³ These meetings with Whitefield seem to have had a great impact on Newton and he became more and more concerned about the low religious state of the people of Liverpool. He wrote to Whitefield urging him to return.

Meantime Newton was busily teaching himself Greek and Hebrew. His aim was to attain just enough proficiency to enable him to judge the general meaning of the Scriptures from the original tongues. But he soon found that it was taking up too much of his time, ‘I would rather be useful to others, than die with the reputation of an eminent linguist.’⁴

He began writing tracts and short essays concerning the need for men and women to face the eternal realities of life and death, heaven and hell, and of their need for a Saviour. He made feeble attempts to conduct family worship whenever he visited Chatham. Not all welcomed his efforts and his in-laws were especially disturbed by his growing interest in religion. Not that many could avoid the subject, as England was by then in the midst of what we call ‘The Great Evangelical Awakening’. The preaching of Whitefield and the Wesleys was shaking the nation, and there was a widespread and growing concern for matters concerning one’s soul, and of sin and salvation and of righteousness and truth. The Methodist societies as well as the Baptists and Independents were rapidly growing in numbers, much to the ire of the clergy in the Established church.

THOUGHTS OF THE MINISTRY

With the local Established churches spiritually dead, John and Mary aligned themselves more and more with one or other of these new societies and many of their friends were

¹ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 284.

² Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 116.

³ *ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 123.

counted amongst the Dissenters. He was invited to preach, but his first formal attempt (in a Congregational church in Leeds) was a disaster and he retreated humiliated and discouraged.¹ This makes it all the more remarkable that Newton began at this time to think seriously about entering the ordained ministry of the Established church. Perhaps he thought that if Whitefield and Wesley could be successful (both were clergy of the Church of England), then so too might he, should God lead in that direction, 'As my life had been full of remarkable turns, and I seemed selected to show what the Lord could do, I had some hope that perhaps sooner or later He might call me into his service.'²

During this heart-searching period he began to examine his life in minute detail, recording all his deliberations in a small diary. He would rise early in the morning for prayer and meditation on the Scriptures (even though he often fell asleep at work during the day!) Amongst other things, he came under the deep conviction that his love for Mary was idolatrous, and told her so. She in turn wrote:

'I delight, admire, and love to hang upon every sentence, and every action of my dearest John; and yet how wanting, and how cold, am I to the gracious Author of all our mercies, to whom we owe each other, our happy affection, and all the satisfaction that flows from it!'³

He also began to curb his ready wit, realising that, though it was a gift of God, it was often exercised out of place. He called it, 'a dangerous talent which needs much grace to restrain and much judgment to manage.'⁴

At the same time he had no intention of becoming gloomy or too serious. He wrote:

'I do not think either sourness or gloominess become a preacher . . . True gravity is far from these and is a temperament of behaviour arising from a fixed persuasion of the presence of God, the value of souls, the shortness of time, the influence of example, the love of mankind and the vastness and reality of eternal things, all impressed upon the mind together.'⁵

APPLIES FOR ORDINATION

In order to be ordained in the Church of England, Newton required testimonials as to his credentials and character. Many whom he approached refused, not willing to put their name to this man who associated with Methodists and other Dissenters. When at last he did find someone who would vouch for him, he could not find a Bishop who would ordain him. The trouble was, Newton had no University training, a prerequisite to ordination in his day. He talked it over with John Wesley, who wrote:

'I had a good deal of conversation with Mr Newton. His case is very peculiar. Our church requires that clergymen should be men of learning, and, to this end, have a University education. But how many have a University education and yet have no learning at all! Yet these men are ordained! Meantime, one of eminent learning, as well as unblamable behaviour, cannot be ordained because he was not at the University! What a mere farce is this! Who would believe that any Christian bishop would stoop to so poor an evasion?'⁶

Newton decided to apply directly to the Archbishop of Canterbury, determining that if the Established church would not have him then he would join the Dissenters. As it was

¹ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants. 1965, p. 294.

² John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 124.

³ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 124.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 124.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 128.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 132.

he had already been made several offers to take up ministry in Congregational churches, and filled a temporary vacancy in one for three months.¹

Meantime Newton was already conducting Sunday night services in his home and many urged him to move into larger premises so that he could continue to minister in that way as an Independent. It was only Mary's arguments against the idea that restrained him from going ahead. He continued to apply for ordination in the Church of England only to meet with further rebuttals.

BEGINS AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE 1764

Newton was frustrated and impatient to be getting on with what he could now see was his true vocation, the proclamation of God's Word. It was at this time that he compiled what he called 'a brief account of the Lord's dealings with me from my infancy to the time of my settlement here.'² This was to be the first draft of his famous *Authentic Narrative*, and was intended, as he put it, 'to praise the exceeding riches of His goodness to an unworthy wretch.'³

ORDINATION AND OLNEY CURATE 1764

This autobiography, as well as news of Newton's frustrating attempts to be ordained, came to the attention of Lord Dartmouth, President of the Board of Trade and Secretary of State to the Colonies. He was a man of great influence and so decided to take up Newton's case with the Church of England. At the same time a Presbyterian church in Yorkshire invited Newton to become their minister. He was on the point of accepting when Lord Dartmouth offered him a curacy in Buckinghamshire. The Bishop of Lincoln agreed to ordain Newton, and so, at 39, he found himself a clergyman in the Established Church, curate in the little lace-making village of Olney. He remained there nearly 16 years.

Newton appears to have had great difficulty overcoming his nervousness in learning to preach in front of his congregation. He was not a profound thinker and his sermons were not great theological works but rather down-to-earth pastorally helpful expositions of his favourite passages. He did not like preaching long sermons and commented dryly:

'There is still in being an old-fashioned instrument called an hour-glass which used to be the measure of a good sermon, and I think it is a tolerable stint. . . . when weariness begins edification ends. Perhaps it is better to feed our people like chickens a little and often, than to cram them like turkeys till they cannot hold one goblet more. Besides, over-long sermons break in upon family concerns, and often call off the thoughts from the sermon to the pudding at home, which is in danger of being over-boiled.'⁴

Newton was, as he put it, 'an avowed Calvinist'. But, like Whitefield, hated controversy. He could never for a single day forget his past nor the grace of God that had salvaged him. He therefore accepted men and women of widely diverging doctrinal persuasions, even if he genuinely thought they were wrong in some points, 'If I thought a person feared sin, loved the word of God, and was seeking after Jesus, I would not walk the length of my study to proselyte him to the Calvinist doctrines.'⁵

¹ *ibid.*, p. 134.

² *ibid.*, p. 137.

³ *ibid.*, p. 137.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 147.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 148.

MINISTRY TO ADULTS AND CHILDREN IN OLNEY

Newton maintained a consistent and faithful ministry to the relatively poor lace-makers of Olney, preaching often a dozen sermons a week, visiting his people in their little factories and praying with them in their cottages. The congregation often numbered some 2000.¹ Although he and Mary never had any children, Newton loved to have children around him. He obtained the use of an empty mansion owned by Lord Dartmouth in Olney and set up a school to teach the local children the Scriptures and tell them tales of his adventures at sea. It was not long before he had almost two hundred attending. On Sundays the vicarage was 'open house' for lunch to all who had walked to church six miles or more. After Evensong it was common for as many as seventy to return to the vicarage for prayer and singing.²

By now Newton had become well known through the publication of his *Authentic Narrative*, and was made numerous offers to move to more substantial livings. He refused such tempting offers, concerned as to what would happen to his little flock in Olney if he were to leave, 'A parish is an awful millstone to those who see nothing valuable in the flock but the fleece.'³

WILLIAM COWPER COMES TO OLNEY

In 1767 an important event occurred in Newton's life. William Cowper and his housekeeper, Mrs Unwin, moved to Olney. Cowper (or *Sir Cowper* as he soon came to be known in the squireless village) was a man of considerable education and learning who had trained for the Law. He was a Christian man who was determined to 'be an instrument of turning many to the truth'.⁴ He and Newton had met before, and Newton already knew that Cowper could be of a deeply depressive frame of mind, subject to melancholy of the worst possible intensity. He knew that Cowper had had a number of breakdowns and had attempted suicide several times. He knew that he had been committed to an asylum but had been discharged after eighteen months. Cowper came to Olney to be near Newton, and thus began a remarkable friendship.

Of his friend Newton wrote years later:

'one of the principle blessings of my life; a friend and a counsellor, in whose company for almost seven years, though we were seldom seven successive waking hours separated, I always found new pleasure.'⁵

... daily admiring and trying to imitate him ... I can hardly form an idea of a closer walk with God than he uniformly maintained. Communion with God and the good of His people seemed to be the only objects he had in view from the beginning to the end of the year.'⁶

'Of all men that I ever heard pray, no one equalled Mr Cowper.'

'The Lord evidently sent him to Olney ... where he has been a blessing to many, a great blessing to myself.'⁷

Both men had a love of walking in the fields and woods, and the two soon got into the habit of walking together almost every day, sometimes it was to a nearby village where Newton was preaching, or else to some small hamlet where there was a prayer meeting to attend. They both read widely, and Cowper's better education was of great benefit and

¹ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 297.

² Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 153.

³ *ibid.*, p. 157.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 160.

⁵ 'William Cowper and His Affliction', *Banner of Truth Magazine*, no. 96, p. 12.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 19.

encouragement to the self-taught Newton. For Mary's part, the coming of Mrs Unwin gave her a wonderfully cheerful friend with whom to enjoy memorable times of happy association. The four spent many pleasant evenings together.

FIRST HYMNS WRITTEN

There was a great revival of hymn writing in Newton's day, with thousands coming from the pens of men like the Wesleys, Watts and Doddridge. Newton had composed many a ribald verse in his sea-going days and now began to think of the need of his flock for verses to encourage them in the Faith. In 1769 he and Cowper each wrote a hymn to be sung on the occasion of a new prayer meeting in Olney. Newton's hymn became famous:

Dear Shepherd of thy people, hear,
Thy presence now display;
As Thou hast given a place for prayer,
So give us hearts to pray.

Cowper's was even more popular:

Jesus where'er thy people meet,
There they behold thy mercy seat;
Where'er they seek Thee Thou art found,
And every place is hallowed ground.

This was the beginning of a partnership in hymn writing that culminated in the publication in 1779 of the now famous collection of *Olney Hymns*. Of these Cowper wrote 68 and Newton 280.¹ Newton attempted to write at least one hymn a week, though Cowper was less systematic. To us, Newton's best known hymn is of course *Amazing Grace*, the words of which so clearly reflect his awareness of the grace of God which had reached him when he was but a wretched slave of the slave trader. However, there were others that gained significant prominence in his lifetime:

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
And drives away his fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole,
And calms the troubled breast;
'Tis manna to the hungry soul,
And to the weary rest.

And another:

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God!
He, whose word cannot be broken,
Formed thee for His own abode:
On the Rock of ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvations walls surrounded,
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.

¹ 'William Cowper and His Affliction', *Banner of Truth Magazine*, no. 96, p. 12.

Many of Newton's hymns were of a contemplative nature in which he worked through, in verse, the common struggles faced by all believers. These are remarkably honest and practical hymns drawn from his own experience and awareness of the evils of his own heart. For example:

I asked the Lord, that I might grow,
In faith, and love, and ev'ry grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek more earnestly His face.

'Twas He who taught me thus to pray,
And He, I trust, has answered prayer;
But it has been in such a way
As almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that in some favoured hour,
At once He'd answer my request,
And by His love's constraining power
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of the heart;
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in ev'ry part.

Yea, more, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I'd schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

'Lord, why is this?' I trembling cried,
'Wilt thou pursue Thy worm to death?'
''Tis in this way,' the Lord replied,
'I answer prayer for grace and faith.'

'These inward trials I employ,
From self and pride to set thee free;
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
That thou may'st seek thy all in Me.'

COWPER'S ILLNESS RETURNS

For six years Newton and Cowper enjoyed a combined ministry in Olney, the blessings of which extended far beyond the bounds of their own little hamlet. Then in 1770 Cowper suddenly had a relapse of his old depression. Gloom descended upon him and he became listless and disinterested. Newton rushed to his side to help, and day after day his diary records the time he spent attempting to comfort his unresponsive friend:

'My time and thoughts much engross'd to-day by an affecting and critical dispensation [with Cowper]. I was sent for in the morning early and return'd astonish'd and griev'd . . . How much seems now at stake . . . Could hardly attend to anything else.'¹

Newton's attendance at Cowper's side took up so much of his time that he had great difficulty managing his other pastoral duties. For three years there was little change. Then

¹ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 164.

Cowper took it into his head to visit the vicarage with Mrs Unwin. Once there, Cowper refused to leave. They both stayed for more than a year, placing an enormous strain on the Newtons, especially on Mary's already frail health. Eventually it was thought Cowper was well enough to allow Newton to fulfil a fortnight's preaching engagement in Warwickshire. Mary accompanied him, but within a week they had an urgent message to return as Cowper had tried to commit suicide. The year's end saw no improvement and the distress continued well into 1774. Finally, in May, Cowper improved sufficiently for he and Mrs Unwin to return to their own home nearby. Mary Newton wrote: 'The Lord has graciously interposed in this business . . . I could not relieve myself, but He has mercifully relieved me.'¹

Cowper's melancholia became habitual, although for the remainder of his life he was able to go about his affairs with some degree of equilibrium. He continued his close fellowship with Newton and maintained his writing, especially that of composing hymns. Many of his verses are introspective reflecting his feelings and conflicts, though not all are melancholy. He could write: '*Oh for a closer walk with God,*' and end with the high note, '*So shall my walk be close with God, calm and serene my frame.*' And again:

Sometimes a light surprises
The Christian while he sings;
It is the Lord who rises
With healing in His wings:
When comforts are declining,
He grants the soul again
A season of clear shining,
To cheer it after rain.

When Cowper complained to Newton that his mental condition was like the weather, 'a thick fog envelopes everything and at the same time freezes intensely,' he knew he would have to add, 'you will tell me that this cold gloom will be succeeded by a cheerful spring and endeavour to encourage me to hope for a spiritual change resembling it.'² Newton was never far from his friend's side giving words of encouragement and hope. But the storm in Cowper's life did not abate. The last hymn he wrote for the Olney collection reflected his perplexing inner conflict in which he knew that God was sovereign, and yet had lost all assurance of his own salvation:

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footstep in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

NEWTON'S TUMOUR

In 1776 it was discovered that Newton had a tumour on his thigh. He suffered some considerable discomfort as it rapidly grew in size. He decided to undergo the 'experiment of extirpation' and duly went to London's Guys Hospital for the operation. He was especially concerned lest he prove unable to bear the pain and so dishonour his Lord, 'I felt . . . that, being enabled to bear a very sharp operation with tolerable calmness and confidence, was a greater favour granted to me than the deliverance from my malady.'³

¹ *ibid.*, p. 167.

² *ibid.*, p. 179.

³ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 68–69.

THE OLNEY FIRE

In October 1777, a disastrous fire broke out in Olney engulfing a large part of the village. Newton took an active part in attempting to alleviate the suffering of the many victims, and organised the collection of some 200 pounds, a huge sum in those days.¹

Olney, like most villages in England in the eighteenth century, had its bands of drunken ruffians. These terrorised the residents and committed incredible crimes without resistance or punishment. The people lived in dread, especially on occasions like November the 5th, Guy Fawkes night. Even Newton was obliged on one occasion to give them a bribe to avoid having the Rectory burnt to the ground.²

Opposition to Newton began to grow in Olney, and the popularity he knew at first began to wane. Nevertheless, he maintained a consistency in ministry, continuing 'to bless them that persecuted him; knowing that the servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle to all men, apt to teach, patient.' To the last day he spent with the folk of Olney, Newton 'went straight forward, in meekness, instructing those that opposed, if God peradventure might give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.'³

NEWTON'S CONTINUING LOVE FOR MARY

In May 1774 Newton wrote to Mary who was away from home:

'It is rather lonely at present; but I thank God, I am a stranger to the remotest wish that it were lawful to me to have any companion but yourself. Since the Lord gave me the desire of my heart in my dearest Mary, the rest of the sex are no more to me than the tulips in the garden. Oh what a mercy it is, that I can say this! I speak it not in my own praise, but to the praise of the Lord. I have a vile heart, capable of every evil; and, in myself, am as prone to change as a weathercock. But, with respect to you, he has been pleased to keep me as fixed as the north-pole, without one minutes variation for twenty-four years, three months, and one day.'⁴

Nine months later he wrote in his diary, 'The 25th anniversary of my happy marriage, that great hinge upon which all the leading events of my life were to turn.'⁵

While she was away from home again he wrote to her, 'My love was grown pretty tall when I married you, and it has been growing every day since. It was once an acorn but has now spreading branches and deep root like an old oak.'⁶

He would write to her virtually every day when she went away, but she not so regularly to him, as letter writing for her did not come easily. On one occasion he chided her, 'I propose to write every other post. However, if you are seldomer I shall imitate you.'⁷

The threat was effective and Mary wrote back contritely:

'I am sorry that You should be so much disappointed at Missing one Letter . . . I do not intend You shall be balked again if I can help it. for I was never more desirous or impatient after Letters than since I left You Last. the time hangs very heavy, the being Absent tedious.'⁸

¹ *ibid.*, p. 69.

² *ibid.*, p. 69.

³ *ibid.*, p. 71.

⁴ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 168.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 168.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 168.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 171.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 171.

In her next letter she wrote, ‘My own best dear—I have now got New pens and paper but nothing to Say only a repetition of what I have said over and over again, that I love you and miss you and long to be with you.’¹

When she returned after another trip he recorded with thankfulness in his diary, ‘The Lord brought my dear M[ary] safe home . . . we are kept as the apple of his eye under the shadow of his wings.’²

ADOPTED BETSY

The death of one of Mary’s brothers and his wife left their little daughter Betsy an orphan and the Newtons immediately adopted her. She brought great joy and happiness into the vicarage at Olney and Newton’s diary has many an entry chronicling his personal delight in ‘his dear Betsy’ as well as some of their new worries about the day to day task of bringing her up.

MOVE TO WOOLNOTH, LONDON

In 1779 when Newton was 54 he was offered a living at St Mary’s Woolnoth in London. He had been at Olney fifteen years and believed it was time to move. He and Mary bid farewell to their dear friends William Cowper and the long-suffering Mrs Unwin. It was a sad parting.

St Mary’s had a mixed congregation: shopkeepers, artisans and rich merchants, and it was one of the few evangelical Established churches in the whole of London. News of Newton’s arrival brought so many new folk that the regular congregation complained that they could not always get into their favourite pew. The wide range of theological views amongst his hearers prompted Newton to write:

‘I endeavour to keep all Shibboleths, and forms and terms of distinction out of sight, as we keep knives and razors out of the way of children, and if my hearers had not other means of information, I think they would not know from me that there are such creatures as Arminians or Calvinists in the world. But we talk a good deal about Christ.’³

Newton was profoundly aware of the importance of his position in London, but nevertheless marvelled that he should have been graciously permitted such a ministry.

‘That one of the most ignorant, the most miserable, and the most abandoned of slaves should be plucked from his forlorn state of exile in the coast of Africa and eventually be appointed minister of the parish of the first magistrate of the first city of the world; that he should there not only testify to such grace, but himself be a monument of it; that he should be able to record his rescue in his history, preaching, and writings to the world at large is a fact that I marvel in but could never sufficiently understand.’⁴

It was not long before there was a steady stream of people visiting the study of the new vicar:

‘Being of the most friendly and communicative disposition, his house was open to Christians of all ranks and denominations. Here, like a father among his children he used to entertain, encourage and instruct his friends, especially young ministers, or candidates for the ministry. Here also the poor, the

¹ *ibid.*, p. 171.

² *ibid.*, p. 168.

³ *ibid.*, p. 188.

⁴ Dick Bohrer, *John Newton: Letters of a Slave Trader Freed by God’s Grace*, Moody Pr., 1983, p. 107.

afflicted, and tempted found asylum and a sympathy which they could scarcely find, in an equal degree, anywhere else.¹

Newton never turned any one away who came to see him, no matter how much of an interruption their arrival may have been, 'A knock on my study door is a message from God.'²

MEETING WITH WILBERFORCE

In December 1785 Newton received a note from a twenty-six year old Parliamentarian asking for an occasion for 'some serious conversation,' but adding, 'it must be in secret.' The man was William Wilberforce, the close friend of Prime Minister William Pitt. Wilberforce had been brought up by an aunt who was a great supporter of Whitefield, and his early life had been greatly influenced by the Methodists. Now he was troubled by the inequalities he was seeing about him, as well as the realisation that something was lacking in his own life. His boyish piety had given way to unbelief. Perhaps the famous vicar of Woolnoth could help him. Wilberforce had recently been reading Philip Doddridge's *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, and this had led him to reading the Scriptures once again. He had been especially moved by the words, 'If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?'³

Newton was stunned. These were the very words that had spoken to him in that terrible storm on board *The Greyhound* all those years before. He was immediately at one with the distressed young man seated before him, and no doubt they entered there and then upon 'some serious conversation', indeed Wilberforce later wrote, 'Called upon old Newton —was much affected in conversing with him . . . when I came away I found my mind in a calm, tranquil state, more humbled, and looking more devoutly up to God.'⁴

Thus began a close and important friendship between the young reformer in the English Parliament and the old vicar of Woolnoth.

DEBATE ON THE SLAVE TRADE

One subject on Wilberforce's mind was the iniquitous slave trade. He had become convinced that it was evil and should be stopped. But the vested interests were enormous, and it was widely believed that the slave trade was an economic necessity. England could not survive without it. Abolition would ruin plantations, shipbuilders and ship owners; it would bankrupt many of the exporters of goods to Africa as well as the importers from the Colonies.

In May 1787 twelve relatively unknown men (nine of whom were Quakers) formed *The Society for the Abolition of Slavery*. They approached Wilberforce to champion their cause in Parliament. Both Newton and Cowper put pen to paper to write against slavery, and in 1788 Newton was called to give evidence before the Privy Council. Of course he was able to speak from personal experience and gave an eyewitness account of the appalling suffering of his slaves on-board ship. Newton confessed the part he had played in 'a commerce so iniquitous, so cruel, so oppressive, so destructive, as the African Slave Trade.'⁵

¹ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 132.

² Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, p. 366.

³ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 204.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 205.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 210.

The battle for the abolition went on for years, with Wilberforce and his many friends never giving up hope that they would win in the end. Finally, in 1804, Wilberforce, supported by Pitt and Fox, saw the Abolition motion passed in Parliament by a considerable majority. Newton, by then in his eightieth year, was overjoyed and wrote immediately to his friend Wilberforce:

‘Though I can scarcely see the paper before me I must attempt to express my thankfulness to the Lord, and to offer my congratulations to you for the success which he has so far been pleased to give your unwearied endeavours for the abolition of the slave trade.’¹

NEWTON’S LETTERS

For the most part of his time in both Olney and Woolnoth, Newton carried on an extensive ministry in letter writing. His output was prodigious. Many of these letters had been published in England and America and circulated widely, with translations into German and Dutch. It was his letters that brought him much fame and gave him an entrance into those areas of English society that no evangelist, (perhaps apart from Whitefield) could gain. By the time he was a few years in Woolnoth his circle of friends and acquaintances from all strata of society had grown rapidly.

It was Newton’s conviction that it was the Lord’s will that he should do most by means of his letters. It has been said of these letters:

‘There appears to be no aspect of the Christian’s pilgrimage beyond the reach of his sagacity and counsel. He can talk to the young Christian about the various stages of spiritual growth, counsel a “budding” student on the marks of the call to the ministry, advise a probationer on difficulties in the ministry, warn a colleague on the perils that beset the path of the controversialist, advise in the conduct of family worship, speak with authority on the practical bearing of the doctrines of predestination and perseverance on the life of the believer, distinguish between the Christian as he is in his longings and ideals and as he is in practical achievements, and so on.’²

One thing is certain, Newton’s letters were never irrelevant or lacking in content. In one letter entitled *Advantages From Remaining Sin*, he wrote:

My Lord . . . If the evils we feel were not capable of being over-ruled for good, he would not permit them to remain in us. This we may infer from his hatred of sin, and the love which he bears to his people.

As to the remedy, neither our state nor his honour are affected by the workings of indwelling sin, in the hearts of those whom he has taught to wrestle, strive, and mourn, on account of what they feel. Though sin wars, it shall not reign; and though it breaks our peace, it cannot separate from his love. Nor is it inconsistent with his holiness and perfection to manifest his favour to such poor defiled creatures, or to admit them to communion with himself; for they are not considered as in themselves, but as one with Jesus, to whom they have fled for refuge, and by whom they live a life of faith. They are accepted in the Beloved, they have an Advocate with the Father, who once made an atonement for their sins, and ever lives to make intercession for their persons. Though they cannot fulfil the law, he has fulfilled it for them; though the obedience of the members is defiled and imperfect, the obedience of the Head is spotless and complete; and though there is much evil in them, there is something good,—the fruit of his own gracious Spirit . . . They shall not always be as they are now; yet a little while, and they shall be freed from this vile body, which, like the leprous house, is incurably contaminated, and must be entirely taken down. Then they shall see Jesus, as he is, and be like him, and with him for ever.³

¹ *ibid.*, p. 234.

² *Banner of Truth Magazine*, no. 93, p. 28.

³ John Newton, *Collected Letters*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1989, p. 67–68.

Newton wrote on every conceivable subject, especially those which related to one's daily walk with God and growth in grace. He wrote letters on trust in God, on hearing sermons, on temptation, on controversy, on the advantages of poverty, on communion with God. He wrote letters on guidance, on love to the brethren, on the enjoyment of life, on Christians in trade, on the character of a Christian, on conscience, on how to meet the assaults of Satan, on the vanity of the world.

He wrote to a ministerial student on the need for diligence in study:

'By diligence, I understand *spiritual diligence*. Such an active, improving, industrious habit, as is peculiar to a heart impressed with some real abiding sense of the love of God, the worth of souls, the shortness of time, and the importance of eternity. Without this turn of mind, though a man should spend sixteen hours every day in his study, he may be a mere trifler . . . The chief means for attaining wisdom, and suitable gifts for ministry, are the holy Scriptures, and prayer. The one is the fountain of living water, the other the bucket with which we are to draw.'¹

On family worship:

'The chief thing to be attended to is, that it may be a spiritual service; and the great evil to be dreaded and guarded against in the exercise of every duty that returns frequently upon us, is formality. If a stated course of family prayer is kept up as constantly in its season as the striking of the clock, it may come in time to be almost as mechanically performed, unless we are continually looking to the Lord to keep our hearts alive.'²

On election and perseverance:

'As the doctrines of election and perseverance are comfortable, so they cut off all pretence of boasting and self-dependence when they are truly received in the heart, and therefore tend to exalt the Saviour. Of course they stain the pride of all human glory, and leave us nothing to glory in but the Lord. The more we are convinced of our utter depravity and inability from first to last, the more excellent will Jesus appear. The *whole* may give the physician a good word, but the *sick* alone know how to prize him.'³

On candour:

'True candour is a Christian grace, and will grow in no soil but a believing heart. It is an eminent and amiable property of that love which beareth, believeth, hopeth, and endureth all things. It forms the most favourable judgment of persons and characters, and puts the kindest construction upon the conduct of others that it possibly can, consistent with the love of truth. It makes due allowances for the infirmities of human nature, will not listen with pleasure to what is said to the disadvantage of any, nor repeat it without a justifiable cause. It will not be confined within the walls of a party, nor restrain the actings of benevolence to those whom it fully approves; but prompts the mind to an imitation of Him who is kind to the unthankful and the evil, and has taught us to consider every person we see as our neighbour.'⁴

Many of Newton's general letters are extant, as are those he wrote to his dear Mary. The latter were published in two volumes after her death under the title, *Letters to a Wife* and cover the period from 1750 to 1785. It is in these letters that the reader gains detailed insight into Newton's experiences on board ship as well as his passionate love for Mary.

¹ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 141.

² *ibid.*, p. 155.

³ *ibid.*, p. 194.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 356–357.

NEWTON'S SERMONS

It would be impossible to summarise the extent of Newton's sermons, other than to say they covered texts from every book of the Bible and ranged over every conceivable subject that might be of spiritual value to his congregations. His sermons were down-to-earth expositions of the Scriptures, usually based on a text or a series of verses. Often the sermons were upon a theme as suggested by the text of the day. His thoughts were carefully organised, and the flow of the subject easy to follow and well illustrated from his experiences of life. It would have been impossible for his hearers to have misunderstood the content as well as the intent of his messages.

At one time he composed a series of sermons based on the Scriptures used in Handel's *Messiah*. Many in his day believed it to be wrong to put Scripture into popular song, and Handel was much criticised. Newton's sermons directed his hearers, irrespective of their opinion of Handel, to the Scriptural basis of the famous Oratorio.

NEWTON'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DISSENTERS

Newton's early association with the Dissenters had led him to appreciate their points of view, even when they differed considerably from his own. He was determined not to enter into debate over doctrinal issues, and managed to maintain close friendships with men and women of widely differing theological opinions. There was a candour and humility which permeated all his dealings with others. He corresponded equally with Wesley as with Whitefield. He was able to accept among his close friends, Baptists as well as Methodists (a distinction lost on us in today's climate, but very significant in Newton's). His own congregation included, at times, men and women from all the common denominations:

'My hearers are made up of all sorts and my connexions are of all sorts likewise . . . I mean of those who hold the Head. My inclination leads me chiefly to insist on those things in which all who are taught of God agree. And my endeavour is to persuade them to love one another, to bear with one another, to avoid dispute. I preach my own sentiments plainly but peaceably and directly oppose no one. Accordingly, Churchmen and Dissenters, Calvinists and Arminians, Moravians and Methodist, now and then I believe Papists and Quakers, sit quietly to hear me . . . Whoever encourages me to read the Scriptures and to pray for the teaching of the Holy Spirit, and then lets me follow the light the Lord gives me, without being angry because I cannot or will not see with his eyes, nor wear his shoes, is a consistent Protestant. The depravity of human nature, the Deity of the Saviour, the influences of the Holy Spirit, a separation from the world and a devotedness to God—these are the principles which I deem fundamental; and though I would love and serve all mankind, I can have no religious union or communion with those who deny them. But whether a surplice or a band be the fittest distinction of a minister, whether he be best ordained by the laying on or the holding up of hands; whether water-baptism should be administered by a spoonful or a tubful, or in a river, or in Jordan . . . are to me points of no great importance. I will go further. Though a man does not accord with my views of election, yet if he give me good evidence that he is effectually called of God, he is my brother. Though he seems afraid of the doctrine of final perseverance, yet if grace enables him to persevere, he is my brother still. If he loves Jesus, I will love him.'¹

NEWTON'S INFLUENCE AMONG THE ARISTOCRACY

Newton himself was not well educated and did not belong to the social elite of his day. He knew the Gospel had not penetrated to any great extent amongst the ranks of the aristocracy and would not do so until such time as some of their own were converted and

¹ Grace Irwin, *Servant of Slaves*, Oliphants, 1965, pp. 372–373.

began sharing the truth in their fashionable drawing rooms and meeting places of England. It was his Letters and Autobiography that had a part in this very movement of the Gospel into new territory. His growing friendship with Wilberforce expanded to include other well-known figures of his day such as the famous writer Hannah More. When Wilberforce's first book, *The Practical View of Religion*, came out, Newton wrote to him:

'There are many persons both in church and state, who, from their situation, are quite inaccessible to us little folks: what we preach they do not hear, what we write they will not read. But your book must and will be read.'

The huge impact of the preaching of Whitefield and the Wesleys was primarily among the common people of England. Nevertheless, it was not long before the Spirit's movement was felt in London's polite society as well. This was greatly accelerated by the writings of people such as Wilberforce and Hannah More, and often as not, due to the quiet influence behind the scenes, of 'old' Newton.¹

NEWTON AND THE MISSIONARY SOCIETIES

When Newton first read the narratives of Captain Cook's voyages in the Southern Hemisphere he wrote to Cowper expressing his concern for the natives that were being visited by these English ships.² He could see what would happen. The manners, the diseases of the English, to say nothing of their godless ways, would ruin indigenous people. He recalled, with smarting pain, his own early treatment of the slaves supposedly under his 'enlightened' care. It was not surprising therefore that Newton attended some of the Congregationalist's early meetings of the London Missionary Society which had been formed to send Christian chaplains to the colonies.

Shortly after, as a direct result of these London Missionary Society meetings, evangelicals in the Established Church founded the Church Missionary Society, with John Newton on the committee.³

LONG ILLNESS AND DEATH OF MARY

Mary Newton had never enjoyed consistently good health, and in Autumn 1788 she became ill and was told by her doctor that she had breast cancer. The tumour rapidly grew until it was half the size of a melon.⁴ There was nothing that could be done.

Newton was devastated by the news. She had been his 'idol' from the day he first saw her, and he had worshipped her for nearly 46 years. He knew it had been an 'inordinate affection', but could not help himself.

'My conscience told me that I well deserved to be wounded where I was most sensitive; that it was my duty to submit with silence to the will of the Lord. But I felt that, unless He was pleased to give me this submission, I was more likely to toss like a wild bull in a net, in defiance of my better judgment.'⁵

The severe winter that year brought her very low and in severe pain. For almost twelve months she lay in bed. She maintained a quiet ministry to all who came to see her. She

¹ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 212.

² *ibid.*, p. 213.

³ *ibid.*, p. 214.

⁴ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 137.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 138.

read the Scriptures and other books and wrote letters when she could. Then in October 1790 she suddenly lost all peace of mind. One biographer records:

‘She was weak and confused, but to her husband’s acute distress she declared that she no longer believed the Bible, she doubted if the truth itself existed, and she did not want to die. She gave up using those terms of endearment with which he was so familiar, and spoke only to him as though to a stranger.’¹

The trial to Newton was a severe one indeed and he wrestled in prayer, not only on behalf of his dear Mary, but also for himself that he would not go quite mad with grief. For two weeks her state continued unchanged, and then, just as suddenly as her derangement had come, it evaporated and she was herself again. But her strength began to decline rapidly and she was now in dreadful pain night and day. Newton agonised over what was happening to his beloved Mary and felt keenly the disciplinary hand of God upon him.

‘The rod had a voice, and it was the voice of the Lord. I understood the meaning no less plainly than if He had spoken audibly from heaven and said, “Now contemplate your idol! Now see what *she* is, whom you once presumed to prefer to *Me* !” ‘²

From that time to the end he only ever left her side to attend to his preaching engagements. She finally died on 15th December 1790.

For John, life without Mary was inconceivable, but go on he must. He would have to practice what he had preached so many times to others. Trust. Trust God in His sovereign love and providences. Trust Him to sustain and provide for him in his grief and loneliness and emptiness. Trust he must.

Others immediately offered to take up his duties for him. But he refused, knowing that preaching was a catharsis he dare not forgo. ‘Dr Pulpit is my best physician.’³

It was several months after her death that, as he was walking up and down offering up disjointed prayers, a thought suddenly struck him with unusual force: ‘*Grief is self-indulgence. The Lord wants us to be at peace. We should resist grief with all our strength.*’ He instantly said aloud: ‘Lord, I am helpless, indeed, in myself, but I hope I am willing without any reservation for You to help me.’ He saw that since the promises of God are true, then the Lord would be willing to help him if he in turn was willing to be helped.⁴

‘I saw again what I had seen before, but now I see it more clearly: I, as a sinner, had no *rights*, and I, as a believer, could have no *reason* to complain. He had loaned her to me, and He who loaned her had a right to take her back when He chose . . . His sovereignty is connected to His infinite wisdom and goodness.’⁵

HONORARY DOCTORATE

In 1799 Newton was given an honorary doctorate from the University of New Jersey in America. Newton wrote back, thanking them for the honour being bestowed upon him, but refused to accept the title of DD.

‘*I am*’, said he, ‘*as one born out of due time*. I have neither the pretension nor wish to honours of this kind. However, therefore, the University may over-rate my attainments, and thus shew their respect, I must not forget myself: it would be both vain and improper were I to concur in it.’⁶

¹ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 217.

² John Newton, *Out of the Depths*, Moody Pr., p. 141.

³ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 220.

⁴ Dick Bohrer, *John Newton: Letters of a Slave Trader Freed by God’s Grace*, Moody Pr., 1983, p. 116.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 117–118.

⁶ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, vol. 1, p. 85–86.

BETSY'S MADNESS

With both Cowper and Mary gone, Betsy now became Newton's closest companion. They enjoyed many happy times together. But sadly, not for long. In 1801 she too suffered a breakdown and became quite mad. To Newton's dismay and great distress, she was consigned to an asylum. Nevertheless, He humbly submitted to the will of God, noting in his diary the severity of this new trial:

'I have no doubt that thou hast called her by thy grace. I thank thee for the years' comfort (ten) I have had in her; and for the attention and affection she has always shewn me, exceeding that of most daughters to their own parents. Thou hast now tried me, as thou didst Abraham, in my old age; when my eyes are failing, and my strength declines. Thou hast called for my Isaac, who had so long been my chief stay and staff; but it was thy blessing that made her so . . . I desire to leave her under thy care; and chiefly pray for myself that I may be enabled to wait thy time and will, without betraying any signs of impatience or despondency unbecoming my profession and character. Hitherto thou hast helped me; and to thee I look for help in future . . . Lord I submit: subdue every rebellious thought that dares arise against thy will. Spare my eyes, if it please thee; but, above all, strengthen my faith and love.'¹

Thankfully, Betsy gradually recovered, and was not only eventually discharged, but later married happily.

NEWTON'S OLD AGE AND DEATH

With failing memory and poor eyesight Newton continued to faithfully preach into his eighties. One Sunday after he had rambled on for fifty minutes, a friend commented, 'His understanding is in ruins—yet its very ruins are precious, and bits you pick up retain their intrinsic value, beauty and richness.'²

The time came when Newton was so blind that he could not even see his text and it became more and more obvious that preaching was a task that was beyond him. But he was indignant when it was hinted that he should give it up. 'What! Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can still speak?'³

But in October 1806 he mounted the pulpit for the last time. As it was, the poor old man completely forgot what he was preaching about and someone was obliged to enter the pulpit to remind him of the subject!

He was now very frail, though not ill or in any pain. Just old. To a friend he wrote, 'I am packed and sealed and waiting for the post.'⁴

And to another he said, 'I am like a person going a journey in a stage coach, who expects its arrival every hour, and is frequently looking out at the window for it.'⁵

The coach came on the 21st December 1807.⁶ He was 82.

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¹ *ibid.*, p. 87 (footnote).

² Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner*, Wyvern Books, 1960, p. 233.

³ *ibid.*, p. 234.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 235.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 235.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 235.

AMAZING GRACE

Amazing grace (how sweet the sound!)
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

T'was grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures:
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

Yea, when this heart and flesh shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who called me here below,
Will be for ever mine.

* * * * *

JOHN NEWTON—CHRONOLOGY

John Newton born: 24 July 1725
His mother died: 11 July 1732
First visit to Chatham: 1742
Returned to England: December 1743
Press-ganged into Naval service: 1744
Visit to Chatham: December 1744
Deserted from the Navy: 1745?
Newton rescued from Africa: February 1747
The great storm: 10 March 1748
Landed in Ireland: 8 April 1748
Arrived back in Liverpool: May 1748
Captain Newton went to Hudson Bay, Canada: May 1748
Next voyage: 1749?
Returned to England: 1749
Married to Mary: 1 February 1750
Captain Newton died in Canada: 1750
Sailed from Liverpool as Captain of the *Duke of Argyle*: August 1750
Back in England: November 1751
Left England as Captain of the *African*: July 1752
Returned: August 1753
Left England: October 1753
Returned: August 1754
Seizure in Liverpool: November 1754
Met Whitefield: 1754–55
Tide surveyor in Liverpool: August 1755
Whitefield in Liverpool: September 1755
He and Mary moved to live in Liverpool: October 1755
Refused ordination by the Archbishop of York: December 1758
Published *Sermons*: 1760
Published *Omicron*: 1762
Ordained for Olney curacy: 1764
Begins his *Authentic Narrative*: 1764
William Cowper moved to Olney: 1767
Published *Olney Sermons*: 1767
Published *Review of Ecclesiastical History*: 1769
First hymns written: 1769
Published first hymns: 1770
Cowper's illness returned: 1770
Operation for tumour on thigh: 1776
Olney fire: 1777
Moved to St Mary's Woolnoth, London: 1779

Published *Olney Hymns*: 1779
Published *Cardiphonia*: 1781
Meeting with William Wilberforce: December 1785
The Society for the Abolition of Slavery formed: May 1785
Newton gives evidence on slavery before the Privy Council: 1788
Mary diagnosed with cancer: October 1788
Mary Newton died: 15 December 1790
Honorary Doctorate from America: 1799
Church Missionary Society founded: 1799
William Cowper died: 1800
Betsy's madness: 1801
Bill passed abolishing slave trade: 1804
Last sermon: October 1806
John Newton died: 21 December 1807

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