



## Rear Admiral Joseph Denman and the Abolition of Slavery

by John Millen

Commemoration of the Abolition of Slavery has been 'On Air' this past month and August does seem to have been notable in its history. UNESCO chose to commemorate August 23 based on the commencement on that date in 1791 of the slave revolt in Haiti. The British Parliament gave third reading to its Act of Abolition on 26 July 1833, three days before the death of its most persistent advocate, William Wilberforce. It came into force 1 August 1834.

Let us therefore take another look at Joseph Denman's part in combating slavery which came in 1840, briefly described in *This Place*, Flagstone of October 2015. At that time Denman was Commander of *HMS Wanderer* (428 tons, 16 guns) deployed in the West Coast of Africa Fleet.

Shipping Africans across the Atlantic and selling them as slaves was a very nasty business but it must have been immensely profitable. Even when the might of the British Navy was deployed to block the trade many slavers continued to send ships to the African coast. In December 1848 the Times newspaper reported the whereabouts of some 40 navy vessels off the west coast of Africa.\*

that year 5 out of 21 vessels had slipped through carrying a total of 1560 slaves to the Americas.

Also that year the vessel *Courtenay*, after having been chased off the coast by Denman's *HMS Wanderer*, was brought by its crew into Freetown, Sierra Leone, where they denounced her to the authorities as a Spanish slave-trader, and she was seized and condemned for being illegally equipped. (I couldn't resist the coincidence of her name. - JM)

When the Governor of Sierra Leone received a report that two British subjects were being held in a slaver's compound on an island at the mouth of the Gallinas River he ordered Denman to rescue them. Commander Denman had become dissatisfied with the effect of trying to blockade the slaving ships so he mounted a major assault on the slavers' base. Ship's boats from the *Wanderer*, *Rolla* (231 tons, 10 guns) and *Saracen* (228 tons, 10 guns) crossed the bar into the Gallinas River where they encountered slave traders trying to remove their slaves inland. After freeing these 90 slaves Denman set a guard around the slaver's barracoons, their compounds for holding slaves. He then commenced negotiations with Seacca, King of the Gallinas, towards the release of those British subjects, the black woman Fry Norman and her daughter, as well as the elimination of slave trading throughout the king's domain.

Under a clear threat of violence the King agreed to all Denman's terms. After freeing the slaves Denman fired incendiary rockets at the barracoons and ensured their destruction. The navy ships transported a total of 841 freed slaves to Sierra Leone as well as their Spanish owners. But don't be under the impression that Denman

'Buron v. Denman' was a long and controversial one and for the duration Joseph Denman was unable to serve as a naval officer. It was certainly no disadvantage for Denman that his father, who defended him in court, was the First Lord Denman, Attorney General and Lord Chief Justice in the British Parliament. In 1848 the case was finally resolved in Denman's favour.

Buron v. Denman has become a classic case laying down the principles determining when a citizen, acting under instructions from his government, can be sued for damages inflicted on a citizen of another country, not in the course of a war. The case is cited internationally, including in cases before United States courts.

\* For much of the detail that follows I am grateful for the comprehensive site: The Mid-Victorian Royal Navy at <https://www.pdavis.nl/>