



Who was Jonathan Strong?

John Campbell shares a story gleaned from his lockdown reading

(James Walvin's 2011 book, 'The Zong')

This is not a picture of Jonathan Strong, it was painted in Liverpool about 80 years later

Don't panic if you have no idea who Jonathan Strong was. I can't say I'd heard of him until I read about him today. But it's an interesting story, what little we know – the story of a young black Londoner whose personal story changed the course of British history.

The story as we know it begins some time in 1765 when Jonathan Strong joins the queue to see a Doctor Sharpe in his practice in Mincing Lane, off Fenchurch Street, in the heart of the City. The young Jonathan, probably about 16 or 17 at the time, is in a desperate state. His 'owner' (he was a slave brought from Barbados), a London lawyer and plantation owner called David Lisle, has just pistol-whipped Jonathan till he was unconscious and then abandoned him in the gutter. Doctor Sharpe and his younger brother, Granville, who was staying with him at the time, are horrified at Jonathan's condition and his desperate story.

Granville does all he can to help. Jonathan left us an account of what Granville did for him:

'I could hardly walk, or see my way, where I was going, When I came to him, and he saw me in that condition, the gentleman take charity of me, and gave me some stoof to wash my eyes with, and some money to get myself a little necessaries until the next day. The day after, I come to the gentleman, and he sent me to hospital: and I was there four months and a half. All the while I was in the hospital the gentleman find me clothes, shoes and stockings, and when I come out, he paid for my lodgings, and a money to find myself some necessaries: till he gets me into a place.'

Strong, restored to strength, apparently spent the next two years as an errand boy for an apothecary round the corner in Fenchurch Street, until one day he was spotted by David Lisle, his former owner, who had him arrested and thrown in gaol, awaiting transport back to the Caribbean to be sold on as a slave. Fortunately, Granville Sharp heard of this and hurried to the Lord Mayor's office to demand Jonathan's release. After a lot of complex to-and-fro, Jonathan was eventually released. But David Lisle didn't stop there. He took the Sharp brothers to court for prising Strong away from his legal owner, but lost the case. Apparently, he then challenged Granville to a duel.

That's what we know of Jonathan Strong - apart from one vital detail. The encounter with the badly-beaten Jonathan and the relationship that ensued changed not only the life of Granville Sharp, but the course of British history. For it was encountering Jonathan that so profoundly affected Granville that he devoted the rest of his life to working with the black community in London to campaign for the abolition of the slave trade, and then of slavery itself – and he was a key player in that amazing coalition that worked to make the once acceptable totally unacceptable. Thanks, Jonathan!