For our Student Live Project we were given the task of researching exslave abolitionists who came to Britain between 1840 and 1860, focusing on the North West of England. We decided to focus our research on Henry “Box” Brown in the hope of finding some new evidence of his “Mirror” of Slavery Exhibition.

The Entertainments Bill (pictured right) was found in the Eyton collection, which is part of the Shropshire Archives. This is evidence of Brown’s visit to Shrewsbury between the 12th & 17th December 1859 which, to this day, has not been written about by scholars in the field.

There is also an advertisement for this entertainment in the Shrewsbury Chronicle December 9th 1859, which states: “PANORAMA OF THE SLAVE STATES — Our Music Hall will be opened next week with the celebrated panorama of Africa and America with illustrations of Negro life, by Mr. Box Brown, who was born a slave, and as it appears, was packed in a box as luggage and conveyed 350 miles to escape slavery. This panorama has lately been exhibited at Bridgenorth, Broseley, Wenlock … before the clergy and leading gentry, who speak very highly of the entertainment”.

Census Records

In the 1861 census, Henry Brown is shown to be living in North Street, Keighley, Yorkshire as a “lecturer on America etc”, he lived there with his wife Jane Brown, 26 and their daughter Agnes, 7 months, who is registered as born in Stockport, her full name being Agnes Jane Floyd Brown. There is however no record of Brown’s marriage to Jane in this country. In 1864 they had a son named Edward Henry, who was registered in the city of Bristol. On his son’s birth certificate Brown is noted as being a “Lecturer in Mesmerism”. In the next census of 1871 they are registered as living in Cheetham, Manchester, where they also have a servant. It is also whilst in Manchester that they have another daughter named Annie. The evidence shown by the census and the birth registers shows that Brown, along with his family, moved around regularly during his time in Britain.

Links with Wolverhampton

As part of the research we emailed around all the archives in the Northwest. The archives in Manchester replied saying they had a letter in their collection from a Henry Brown. However on viewing the letter there is no proof that this is the same Henry Brown. What is interesting about this is that it was for the Hon. C.P. Villiers, who was the MP for Wolverhampton and to this date the longest serving MP for this country, lasting 60 years. He was also a member of the Society for the Extinction of the slave trade. He was also outspoken about the problems in America, there is a speech he gave on American Affairs which was documented in the New York Times on November 24th 1863. Given the fact that Henry Brown is known to have visited Wolverhampton during his tours and that C.P. Villiers was the M.P. we suspect that there are links between the two.