

Unravelling Devon involvement in Slave-Ownership

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'The early history of the United States of America owes more to Devon than to any other English county.'

Charles Owen (ed.), *The Devon-American Story* (1980)

My task this afternoon is to unravel Devon's involvement in slave-ownership. I have found the task overwhelming because of constantly finding new information – there are leads to follow down little branches of family trees, there are Devon's country houses, a wealth of documents, and – of course – the internet.

So this is a VERY brief introduction to unravelling Devon's involvement with slave-ownership – much has been left out. Let's start with Elias Ball. His story is in *Slaves in the Family*, written by descendant Edward Ball and published in 1998.



Elias Ball by Jeremiah Theus (1716-1774).

'Elias Ball, ...was born in 1676 in a tiny hamlet in western England called Stokeinteignhead. He inherited a plantation in Carolina at the end of the seventeenth century ...His life shows how one family entered the slave business in the birth hours of America. It is a tale composed equally of chance, choice and blood.'

The book has many Devon links – an enslaved woman called Jenny Buller reminds us of Redvers Buller's family, a hill in one of the Ball plantations called 'Hallidon Hill' reminds us of Haldon Hill just outside Exeter; two family members return to England, one after the American War of Independence. This was Colonel Wambaw Elias Ball who had been involved in trading in enslaved Africans in Carolina. He was paid £12,700 sterling from the British Treasury and a lifetime pension in compensation for the slaves he had lost in the war of independence. We sometimes forget about this tranche of compensation payments to British slave owners.

Edward Ball's description of the accent of one of the Balls' black descendants sounds like a Devonian accent: the speaker's great grandmother was thought to have been born in Barbados in 1820 and Joanna Traynor's paper has explained such a Devon connection.

We can envy the writer Edward Ball who had such a collection of papers from which to write his family history in such exquisite detail. You can go on line and hear Edward Ball lecture on this subject. I recommend it for the issues it raises. But it is rare to have access to such comprehensive records.

Do people leave tidy evidence for historians to write up later? Sadly not. We have to scabble around and piece together what we can find. And some important sources of evidence about the history of Devon Slave-ownership are lost.

The earthquake on 7 June 1692 at Port Royal in Jamaica destroyed the settlement. Who knows what evidence of Devon involvement was lost through that event? Only half a dozen of the Royal Customs Books and a few of the City Petty Customs Books for Exeter still exist. They would have provided rich information. The Exeter Probate Office was

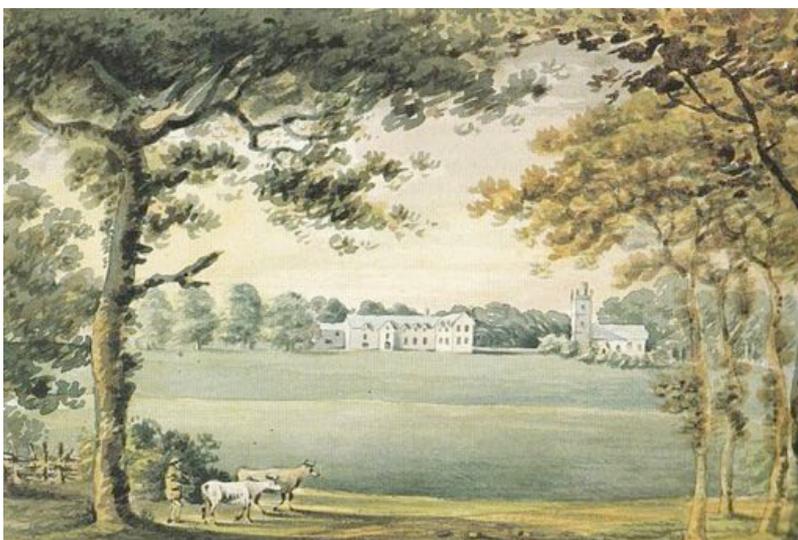
bombed in 1942 so early Devon wills are missing – another rich source of material unavailable.

It is unlikely that we will suddenly come across previously unseen materials – though we can live in hope! But if we look at materials we already have from a different angle than earlier historians, we will uncover new threads in the history.

Take, for example, *The Visitations of Devon* (1895) by Lieut-Col. J. L. Vivian. It's the record of the coats of arms of nobility and gentry and their family trees of the C16th and C17th. It is a sort of 'upper class census'. In this document, of over 900 pages, there are examples of family members living in Barbados, Jamaica, South Carolina, America, Boston, Nevis, St Kitts and Virginia, often the younger sons.

The compensation payments agreed in the 1833 Act of Abolition has been the focus of the UCL project. However, by that time, a lot of investment in slaves had been transformed, exchanged for investment in other parts of the globe and in education and training to join the professional classes and on buying a place amongst the powerful in Devon (and elsewhere) by buying and building large houses. This has meant that the early involvement of Devon's families in slave ownership has been obscured.

The 'Heritage Industry' presents tourists with a sentimentalised, sanitised and comfortable view of the past. Slave-ownership is not a 'comfortable' component in our past – no wonder it often gets left out.



Buckland Filleigh House, Devon, watercolour of 1797 by Rev. John Swete. The house burned down the following year and was rebuilt c. 1810 by John Inglett Fortescue.

The wealth of the Swete family from Modbury in South Devon came from their estates in Antigua and passed to John Tripe in 1781 on condition that he changed his name to Swete. His paintings of houses – some of them built on the profits of slave-ownership – are very much part of our ‘Devon Heritage’. His inheritance gave him the leisure to travel and paint. This particular watercolour by the Rev John Swete is of Buckland Filleigh, the home of the Fortescue family who had interests on the Island of St Vincent through marriage.

We find material in Devon relating to other parts of Britain (for example - the Gale-Morant papers at Exeter University Special Collections which provide the basis of the 2006 ‘Whose History Is It?’ exhibition). On the other hand we find archives relating to the history of the legacy of Devon’s slave-ownership which are not sitting comfortably and easily accessible in the Devon Heritage Centre at Sowton, on the outskirts of Exeter. For example, in 1984 the London Record Society published ‘The Letters of John Paige, London Merchant, 1648-58’:

*‘Like most of the ‘new merchants’, Paige was a Londoner only by adoption. His migration from Stoke Fleming in Devon, where he was born in about 1627, was one instance in an established pattern of mobility which had had consequences for London’s trade...(Other west country families also) sent **their** sons to London in the sixteenth century.*

For me, this raises the question of local, national, world history links in looking at the legacies of British slave-ownership.

In the past ‘local history’ has meant the study of particular local subjects – agricultural practices, craft skills and domestic accounts in a hermetically sealed geographically strictly limited area – in contrast to the study of the big issues of national and international history which were studied quite separately. If we want to understand how the different elements of history connect and influence each other we need to knit these threads together, as Sylvia Collicott did in her 1986 book *Connections Haringey Local – National – World Links*.

Some wider threads in the history of Devonians in the legacy of British slave-ownership include:

- The English colonisation of Ireland
- The Newfoundland fishing industry
- The growth of trade and colonies in the Americas
- And the close ties with the Dutch provinces which were confirmed from 1688 when William of Orange was invited to take over the throne.

The colonisation of Ireland gave the invading English the opportunity not only to carve out wealth by taking over Irish lands but also gave them access to the enforced labour of Irish people . There are many records of wealthy Devonians in Ireland in Vivian's *Visitations* and on church memorials.



Monument to the wives of Arthur Chichester, 1st Earl of Donegal (1606-1674/5), Eggesford Church, Devon.

The picturesque Eggesford church can be seen from trains on the Tarka Line (the North Devon railway, which incidentally was partly funded by compensation monies following the Act of 1833). The church houses two ornate memorials to the Chichester family (who married into the Fortescue family whose home at Buckland Filleigh was painted by the Rev John Swete. Swete also painted Eggesford House a couple of times). The English practised their techniques of colonisation in Ireland.

The Newfoundland fishing industry provided preserved/dried fish for both home consumption and in the Americas. 'Salt fish' is a staple in Caribbean cuisine. In the seventeenth century household accounts of the Earl of Bath at Tawstock in North Devon and the Reynell family of Forde 'Canada fish', 'Nuland fish', 'dry fish' and 'Poor Johns' feature regularly.

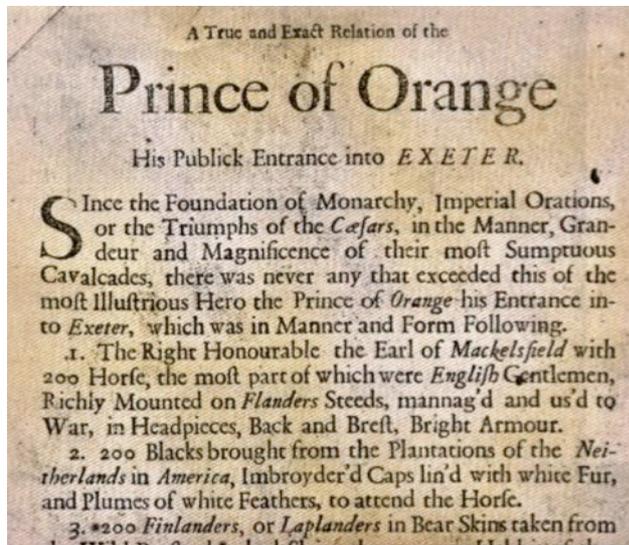
The growth of trade with the Americas as the plantations developed changed existing patterns of trade and consumption in Devon and beyond. The same household accounts as above list purchases of sugar – 28 lbs for £1 13s on Friday 30 November 1627 for Sir Richard and Lady Lucy Reynell of Forde and the Tawstock accounts list 'Paid Mr George Shurte of Biddeford for a quarter of a hundred of sugar at 13d per pound 01 1[s] 04[d]' .

It is interesting to note that 'James the Blackamoor' earned wages of £4 a year – on top of board, clothes and lodging – as cook to the Earl of Bath in Tawstock, Devon, in the 1640s. Does this indicate an association of the household with slave-ownership?



Example of a Dutch house in Topsham, Devon.

The late Lisa Jardine's book *Going Dutch* examines the close relationship – political, economic and cultural – between Britain and Holland, a relationship which has been underestimated. The Dutch style houses in Topsham manifest Dutch influence in Devon. In the Exeter Military survey of 1522 more than a third of the 66 'aliens' listed were Dutch. British merchants appreciated that the Dutch were highly developed in their trading practices and development of modern capitalism – complete with a stock exchange in Amsterdam. The gentry here found this very attractive and supported William of Orange's claim to the throne in 1688.



Black people march from Brixham to London. From a broadsheet account of William of Orange arriving in Exeter on 17 October 1688.



An example of a 'Blackamoor' garden statue.

The '200 Blacks' who were part of William of Orange's entourage as he processed from Brixham to London to claim the throne in 1688 are now quite well known. Less well known is the lead statue of an African which used to be in a garden about 6 miles from Exeter. William of Orange himself placed the first order for this statue for Hampton Palace and it was recorded as the most popular of all the lead garden statues made in Britain in the eighteenth century and is a symptom of the adoption of Dutch culture. This image of an African was a very particular legacy of British slave-ownership in Devon.



Left: John Hawkins' coat of arms.

Below: A la Ronde, near Exeter.

Below left: the coat of arms of the Hurlock family on display in the library at A la Ronde.



Sometimes we can misinterpret evidence. Sir John Hawkins' coat of arms includes an African figure/African figures and this has been interpreted as acknowledging where his wealth came from. But what of the African heads on a coat of arms in the National Trust property A la Ronde, near Exeter, built by two women, cousins in the Parminter family, on their return from the Grand Tour in Europe. The coat of arms of the Hurlock family, with African heads, is on display in the library at A la Ronde. I have been very firmly told that 'The family had no connections with the Slave Trade.'

And indeed there are OTHER explanations for the heads of Africans on coats of arms not related to slave-ownership. They are described as 'Moors Heads' by the College of Heralds and date back to the 13th century in British Heraldry.

However – there ARE connections with A la Ronde and Slave-ownership.

The Parminter family originally came from Bideford in North Devon where they were merchants. John Parminter helped finance a ship called *Elizabeth* to the Guinea coast in 1700. The Parminters had connections by marriage with the Rolle, Walrond and Baring families, all involved with slave-ownership.

Another background factor to explain the interest in plantations in the Americas for Devonians was the economic situation: eighteenth century British farms were less productive than West Indian sugar estates: one 300 acre sugar estate could make £7,000 pa whereas one 250 acre estate in England only made £2,000 pa. It was a no-brainer if you wanted to make money.

The idea of the triangular trade is a construct of historians. While it is useful to explain much about the transatlantic slave trade, it does not fully describe all the trade patterns of the early Devon involvement in slave-ownership.

The John Burwell Book, in the Devon Record Office, lists voyages made by Devon ships in 1699 and 1700. Cargo lists include Tobacco, English Spirit, Beans, Guinea Grain, Cloth, Iron Barrs, Gunpowder and more. Destinations include Guinea, East India, Callibar, Shidak off coast of Guinea. You can see that the 'East Indies' means the listed voyage is not simply following the Triangular Trade pattern.

The John Burwell Book lists columns of figures looks like a division of shares from a voyage:

Godfrey Webster	750	Jnata	129
Jonathan Low	250	" "	43
Danwell Jemin?aud	600	" "	103-4-0
Cap Wm Ketch	400	" "	68-16-0
Claud Jominson	600	" "	103-4-0
Tho & Joh Stark	1000	" "	172-0-0
Claud Hay?s	120	" "	120-8-0
Lan Galdy	700	" "	206-8-0
Joh Denson	600	" "	103-4-0
	-----		-----
	6100		1049-04-0

'Janata' is the name of a Bangladeshi bank today so I suspect it is an East Indian currency. Nick Draper has suggested that the right hand column is the same money expressed in £ s d, perhaps profits from a journey?

Another section of John Burwell's Book gives an account of 'Goods Brought and Sold at Morandoros 1698/9'. Whether it is at a point of purchase or sale, it seems clear that these are enslaved people:

Goods bought and Sold at Morandoros 1698/9

Men	98
Women	71
Boys	37
Girls	9
	215

We have an idea of what ships involved in the Transatlantic Slave Trade carried. The framework of the Triangular Trade identifies beads, firearms, cloth, alcohol and manufactured goods travelling from Europe to Africa; enslaved men, women and children from Africa to the Americas; and then products of the plantations, including sugar, rum and molasses from the Americas back to Europe. What is missing from these lists – without which the whole enterprise would have failed?

The prosaic – requirements for everyday living – food, pottery, clothing, shoes, tools and items such as nails, shackles to control the enslaved – a hundred very ordinary things, plus the luxury items for the wealthy plantation owners wanting to maintain their way of living. Who provided these items? The invoice below provides an example of goods first shipped from Exeter to London and then sent on to Jamaica.

London 29th April 1701

INVOICE of six Cases of Shoes and Pumps, Shipt by Robert Butcher Esq^r on Board the ship Teles, Captain Godwin Waller Comander for Jamaica and conveyed to Mr. Bayly Clerke & Bayly Merchants at Kingston

N^o of Goods in Jamaica. Mark and No^o of Merchant

2... C ^o	2 Cases	1 ^o	at 12.2.0	24.4.0
		2 ^o	at 13.10.0	26.2.0
1... E ^o	1 Case	1 ^o	at 7.7.0	7.7.0
		2 ^o	at 7.17.6	14.3.12
1... D ^o	1 Case	1 ^o	at 4.0.0	4.0.0
		2 ^o	at 0.0.0	0.0.0
2... m ^o	2 Cases	1 ^o	at 19.4.0	38.8.0
		2 ^o	at 19.4.0	38.8.0
			197 ¹ / ₂	217 ¹ / ₂
				92.2.6

Paid for 6 Cases, Packing Shipping Charges and Freight from Exeter to London, £ 3.15.1

Paid for Repacking the Shoes at London, Duty at the Custom House Shipping Charges and Freight from London to Jamaica, 5.11.0

Shipt in Teles

101.11.7

Invoice is for 'six cases of shoes and pumps' as well as cloth, shipped to Jamaica. Most of the cargo were kersies and long ells, cloth made in Tavistock.

24 June 1698: Plymouth. ..this day arrived here the Hannah of Biddiford with Sugar from the Barbados

In the Plymouth Museum collection is a fine example of the apparatus for an African game – known variously as ayo, mancala, bara. On the other side of the board is a carving of a man holding a flintlock amongst other detailed carvings. I have no evidence of flintlock guns being manufactured in Devon but we have records that Devonians traded in guns and gunpowder on slave trading expeditions. This arms trade created destabilisation in Africa throughout the years of slave trading. Western imports of weapons altered the balance of power in Africa. Still today ‘the arms business has a devastating impact on human rights and security, and damages economic development.’ This is another legacy of slave-ownership.



Two side images of a mancala board from Plymouth Museum. Note the carving of a man holding a flintlock in the lower image.

We need to be imaginative in unravelling the history of the legacy of Devon and Slave-ownership and I do not mean that we should make things up. The lack of ease in interpreting evidence does not mean that nothing happened. Evidence has sometimes been obscured in the past.

A local researcher once wrote this to me:

‘As regards the local family I did a little research on; it was the Walrond family who purchased Dulford House, formerly known as Montrath House, near Cullompton. Their fortune was made, over several generations, in Antigua. I must add that I have no direct evidence that they had slaves, but I doubt whether they made their fortune from the fruit of their own manual labour!’



The Slave Ship by W B Turner
Original title - Throwing the Dead and Dying Overboard

There are interpretations of history in different art forms such as painting and writing. For me they are an inspiration to unravel the story further.

Turner's painting, *The Slave Ship*, was painted in response to the story of the *Zong*

Fred D'Aguiar wrote *Feeding the Ghosts* in response to the same story about the *Zong*. This was a ship which was carrying enslaved people from Africa to the Americas when the captain instructed the crew to throw some of those people overboard because it made better financial sense to claim for their loss through their insurance policy than to let them stay alive.

Fred D'Aguiar ends the book with these words:

'We were all dead. The ship was full of ghosts. All the cruelties we sustained were maintained by us.

... I have a list of names. I know who did what to whom. But my detailed knowledge has made not an iota of difference to history or to the sea. All the knowledge has done is to burden me.

I am in your community, in a cottage or an apartment or cardboard box, tucked away in a quiet corner, ruminating over these very things. The Zong is on the high seas. Men, women and children are thrown overboard by the captain and his crew. One of them is me. One of them is you. One of them is doing the throwing, the other is being thrown. I'm not sure who is who, you or I.

....There is no fear, nor shame in this piece of information. There is only the fact of the Zong and its unending voyage and those deaths that cannot be undone.

Where death has begun but remains unfinished because it recurs.The ghosts feed on the story of themselves.

The past is laid to rest when it is told.'

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