

UCL Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Poster Exhibition, Devon

As part of the Legacies of British Slave-Ownership project managed by University College, London, a workshop was held at the Exeter Community Centre on Saturday 14 November 2015, attended by about 70 people. In conjunction with that workshop, a poster exhibition was organised. This exhibition consisted of 5 large posters, each one containing three A1 panels. Three of the posters were generic, having been used at other workshops around the country, but the other two posters were specific to Devon's connection with slavery and were prepared specifically for this exhibition.

The topics covered in the generic posters were as follows:

1. The Slave Trade, including a map showing the routes taken between Africa and the New World, a diagram illustrating the conditions on board the slave ships, and the arrangements for the sale of the enslaved once they arrived in the Americas;
2. Life in the Colonies, including details of life on the plantations, the conditions in which the enslaved lived, and efforts at resistance or revolt by those who had been enslaved; and
3. Slave-owners in Britain, including the role of absentee slave-owners, merchants and bankers, and female slave owners.

The content of the two Devon posters was agreed through discussion between UCL and the Exeter Group of researchers who were assisting UCL with preparations for the workshop. After much discussion, the final content of the two posters was as follows:

4. Devon and Slavery (1), including the early involvement of people from Devon such as John Hawkins, Devon's part in the creation of slave codes in the Colonies, and the involvement of bankers such as the Barings and the Praeds; and
5. Devon and Slavery (2), including traders and settlers such as the Davy family, politicians and landowners such as Denys Rolle and his son John, and John Fortescue, and the presence of some Africans in Devon.

The printing and lamination of the posters was organised by UCL, and the posters duly arrived in Exeter on Thursday 22 October, protected inside cardboard rolls. A large supply of Velcro Adhesive arrived the next morning, just in time for the first exhibition. Arrangements had already been made for displaying the posters at various institutions in the lead-up to the workshop and beyond. October was Black History Month, which was an added incentive for local institutions to display the posters.

Attempts were made to display the posters at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), but we were informed that exhibitions there were planned two years in advance. The Exeter Public Library was unable to host the exhibition since it did not have a suitable public space to display the posters.

The posters were put on display as follows:

23-30 Oct	– Devon and Exeter Institution
30 Oct – 6 Nov	– Devon Heritage Centre
6-17 Nov	– Exeter Community Centre
17 Nov – 17 Dec	– Devon Heritage Centre

As part of the display at DHC, the DHC has set up in the main search room a complementary display cabinet of documents relating to slave ownership in Antigua by the Swete family of Modbury.

All in all, the exhibition has proved popular with the organisations which have displayed it, though the size of the posters has been slightly problematic. While UCL retains ownership of the posters, they have kindly agreed that the Global Centre can look after them and make use of them as they see fit.

Peter Wingfield-Digby
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