

Which Phillpotts was the Slave-owner?

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1. Introduction

The Legacies of British Slave-ownership database (www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs) is a valuable resource for anyone wanting to start research on slave-ownership. For those in the West Country, one intriguing inclusion in the database is the name of Henry Phillpotts.

Henry Phillpotts was Bishop of Exeter for a period of 38 years, from 1831 until his death in 1869. He was a controversial bishop, who was very active in politics and spoke out on many topical issues. He was probably the most famous, indeed infamous, Anglican cleric of his day. The Times newspaper, in its obituary notice, described him as “fierce, fiery and intolerant of opposition”.

Several respected writers in Devon have stated that, because the bishop’s name appears in the LBS database, he must have been a slave-owner. But this is not true. The compensation that he and three other people received in 1835 was in their role as executors and trustees of the will of a person who had died two years earlier. That person was John William Ward, 1st Earl of Dudley, who owned large industrial enterprises in the Midlands as well as three plantations in Jamaica. He had had a short spell as Foreign Secretary in 1827. Since he was unmarried, he had set up a comprehensive trusteeship in his will to look after his extensive estate after his death, so that the estate would pass to William Ward, his second cousin once removed, then aged only 16. It is most unlikely that any of the four executors would have benefited financially from this compensation payment. Also, I want to make it quite clear that, so far, no evidence has been found that the bishop ever owned slaves.

And while on the subject of bishops of Exeter, we should mention the sugar processing factory at the Bishop’s Palace, which is mentioned on one of the posters accompanying this workshop. There was indeed a sugar processing factory at the Bishop’s Palace, but it had nothing to do with any bishop. It all happened at a very turbulent time in English history. The Palace was taken over by the City Corporation during the time of the Civil War and Commonwealth, and part of the building was leased to a person who used it as a sugar house. The Palace was returned (much damaged) to the bishop at the Restoration in 1660. Remains of the sugar house were found in 1821 when restoration work was carried out.

But there is another intriguing name in the LBS database that is of special interest - **Thomas Phillpotts** – and he is the focus of this paper. More than £15,000 of compensation money (the equivalent of perhaps one or two million pounds today) is shown against his name, in respect of 772 slaves spread across nine different parishes in Jamaica, but only part of this amount would have come directly to him. In several instances he was the executor or trustee for someone else, and in other cases he had to share the compensation with his business partners.

¹ pwdigby at btinternet.com. This paper was presented at the Workshop on Slavery, Slave-ownership and Devon and Cornwall, held at the Exeter Community Centre on 14 November 2015, as part of the University College London project on the Legacies of British Slave-Ownership.

As noted in the LBS database, Thomas Phillpotts and his wife Mary are recorded in the British census returns for 1851 and 1861. He is shown as a West India merchant who was born in Gloucester around 1785. He died in Somerset in 1862.

For me, the key question was: "Could he be some relation of the eminent bishop?" I did some research online and found several clues that indicated that Thomas Phillpotts was indeed related to the bishop. In fact he was the bishop's brother, and I found confirmation of this fact when I belatedly consulted the bishop's family papers in the Exeter Cathedral Library.

2. Thomas Phillpotts in Jamaica

So what do we know about Thomas Phillpotts? It appears that, after schooling in Gloucester, he went out to Jamaica around 1805, aged about 20. Initially he seems to have worked as Secretary of the Close Harbour Company at Montego Bay. This was the first company to be formed in the West Indies for carrying out public works. Its objective was to build a breakwater at Montego Bay, to try to prevent ships being washed ashore by strong incoming winds. The harbour would have been able to accommodate about 30 ships.

In 1810 he is mentioned in a Jamaican Act of Parliament: it is *An Act for Making a Carriage-Road from Marlborough Mount to Alligator Pond, by a Toll on Coffee*. Thomas is named as one of the Trustees for implementing this work. Alligator Pond is on the southern coast of Jamaica, and the road, when completed, would have been used for bringing produce from the hinterland down to the coast for shipment elsewhere.

In 1815 he got married to Mary Hodgson, and they had several children in Jamaica. In the Jamaica Almanac for 1816 he is shown as owning 168 slaves, and his slave ownership continues (but on a smaller scale) in later years. In 1817 he is made an assistant judge and magistrate. Over the course of several years one of his judicial duties was to witness the declarations of slave ownership made by others, and his name appears frequently in the Jamaican records.

In 1818 he was granted 300 acres of land in St Ann. I have not yet discovered what he did with this land, and I have not found any evidence that he ran a plantation. Instead, it seems more likely that he was involved in shipping agricultural produce from Jamaica to other countries. This is supported by the fact that in 1826 he is recorded in the list of Lloyds of London as their agent for Montego Bay.

3. Thomas Phillpotts in England

In 1829 he and his wife settled in London – they lived in Tavistock Square - and they had several more children over the next few years. He quickly re-established his links with Gloucester. He had one big advantage, in that he had already been made a Freeman of Gloucester back in 1821 during a visit to England. In 1830 he appears in the Gloucester Electoral Register, and is shown as having voted in the parliamentary elections for his brother John, who had already been Mayor of Gloucester and who then became one of its two MPs.

Early in 1832 there were riots in Jamaica, and Thomas gave evidence to the Committee of the House of Commons appointed to “inquire into the causes and remedy of West India Distress”.

As indicated in the LBS database, Thomas’s main business partner was a man called Samuel Baker. In April 1832 a prominent group of 47 West India merchants, including Baker and Phillpotts, submitted a protest to the Colonial Secretary about the actions of the Government, insisting on their need for compensation if they lost property in the West Indies as a result of government policies. Their protest letter appeared in the Times of London. These signatories form a fascinating list of names, which reappear a few years later in the LBS compensation records.

In 1835 Thomas Phillpotts is shown as a provisional director of the Gravesend and Dover Railway. He was also Chairman of Directors of the Anti-Dry-Rot Company, which he set up to manufacture mercuric chloride, used for the preservation of timber.

As late as 1840 Baker and Phillpotts are shown as owning more than 1,000 acres at Mammee Ridge in Jamaica. This is the same plantation for which Phillpotts had received compensation of more than £1,500 in 1836 as mortgagee for about 80 slaves.

In addition to their London activities, Thomas Phillpotts and his partner Samuel Baker were very active in the development of Gloucester, buying up key plots of land for development, and selling them on to local merchants. Together, Baker and Phillpotts helped to develop Gloucester as a major port. Today the main quay is called Baker’s Quay.

Many of the warehouses beside the quay (which are named after their first occupants) are still standing today, and now provide luxury flats, offices, restaurants and bars. One of them is called Phillpotts Warehouse. In fact it is not named after Thomas himself, but after his eldest son Abraham Hodgson Phillpotts, who had been born in Jamaica and who became an important corn merchant in Gloucester. Originally father and son had a business partnership as import merchants, but in 1844 Thomas withdrew from this partnership, and left his son to carry on the business by himself. The warehouse was built in 1846.

4. Eden Phillpotts

I want to mention another of Thomas’s descendants, because he had a close link with Devon. One of Thomas’s sons, born in London, was named Henry. He joined the Bengal infantry in India, got married, had three sons, but died young. His widow came back from India with the three boys, and the boys went to school in Plymouth.

Eden, the eldest son, worked for an insurance company in London for ten years before marrying and settling in Torquay, where he became a prolific writer of novels, plays and poems. In the 1911 Census his occupation is shown as “a man of letters”. Later he moved to Broadclyst near Exeter, where he died in 1960. Eden Phillpotts published some 250 works. He was most famous (in the early part of the last century) as the author of the Dartmoor cycle of 18 novels, each set in a different part of Dartmoor.

5. Attitudes to slavery

I am curious to know whether the fact of Thomas's slave-ownership had any effect on the relations between different members of the Phillpotts family, some of whom were in the public eye. One can get some idea by looking at the writings of both Eden Phillpotts and his daughter Adelaide (Ross). This is clearly an interesting area for further research, but I would like to offer one or two initial thoughts.

In 1895 Eden made a trip to the Caribbean, travelling on the same ship as his brother Mac, who happened to be the ship's surgeon. Although the ship was *en route* to Jamaica, they got off at Barbados, and then visited other islands in the Caribbean, without going to Jamaica. This trip formed the subject of Eden's book *In Sugar-Cane Land*. Did Eden realise that his grandfather had lived in Jamaica for 25 years? If so, it seems extraordinary that he and his brother did not make a special effort to visit Jamaica.

Eden's daughter Adelaide is quite revealing in her autobiography. On the very first page she says that while the family of Eden's mother welcomed them back to England from India, his father's family "the Phillpotts clan, including Henry, Bishop of Exeter, were dutiful rather than affectionate." On the second page she mentions her great-uncle Abraham. As she puts it: "Few of the (*relations*) went into business, but one, Great-Uncle Abraham, had made a fortune in Jamaica". In fact, as we have already mentioned, his fortune had been made in Gloucester from his activities as a corn merchant. Surprisingly, Adelaide makes no mention of her great grandfather Thomas, whose business activities in Jamaica and Gloucester were surely far more significant.

And finally, In relation to Bishop Phillpotts himself, I am curious to know what his views were on the subject of slavery. It seems as though the bishop spoke out, and/or issued pamphlets, on almost all the key issues of his day. But the abolition of slavery is one burning topic on which he appears not to have said or written anything. Significantly, the topic of slavery is not mentioned at all in either of the two biographies of the Bishop that I have read.

This is particularly surprising, since he was appointed bishop at the end of 1830, just as the issue of slavery was coming to the boil; the Abolition of Slavery bill was finally passed in 1833. As it was, Henry's appointment to Exeter had already provoked debates in Parliament. How much more problematic would his appointment have been, if people had realised that his brother Thomas had been a slave-owner?

But I have found a remarkable exchange of letters that he had at a much earlier time, published in the Newcastle Courant, which gives a good indication of where he stood on this issue. Before becoming Bishop of Exeter, Henry Phillpotts was for ten years Rector of Stanhope in County Durham. Historically, because of income from lead mining, Stanhope used to be the richest church living in England. In 1823, Thomas Fowell Buxton, MP for Weymouth, who had taken over from William Wilberforce as leader in parliament of the anti-slavery movement, introduced his famous bill in parliament condemning the state of slavery as "repugnant to the principles of the British Constitution and of the Christian religion", but the bill was set aside.

The Anti-Slavery Society then began organising petitions to parliament. In 1824, the Anti-Slavery Society approached Henry Phillpotts, as they did with many other people in influential positions, asking for his support in promoting a petition to Parliament from the people of Stanhope in support of the abolition of slavery. This request drew a scathing reply from the future bishop, in which he attempted to argue (at least initially) that both the Bible and the British Constitution justified the use of slavery.

His writing is convoluted, and his sentence structure very complex, so it is sometimes difficult to make out what he is trying to say. However, it is instructive to contrast the tone of his first letter which he was not expecting to see published, with the tone of his later letters which he knew would be published. I would urge anyone who is interested in this topic, to have a look at this exchange of correspondence (all 5,000 words of it), since it gives good insights into the future Bishop's thoughts on the subject of slavery.

6. Concluding remarks

In this short presentation I have mentioned a few issues in relation to the Phillpotts family. In summary, my main conclusions are:

- 1, Bishop Phillpotts was not a slave owner. **BUT**
2. His brother Thomas was a slave owner in Jamaica and a West India merchant in England.
3. This may well explain the Bishop's failure to speak out on the issue of slavery.

Main sources

LBS database: www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs

Family tree information: www.ancestry.co.uk and familysearch.org

Jamaica almanacs at Jamaicanfamilysearch.com

Hansard parliamentary records

Biographies of Bishop Phillpotts

Phillpotts family records at Exeter Cathedral Library