

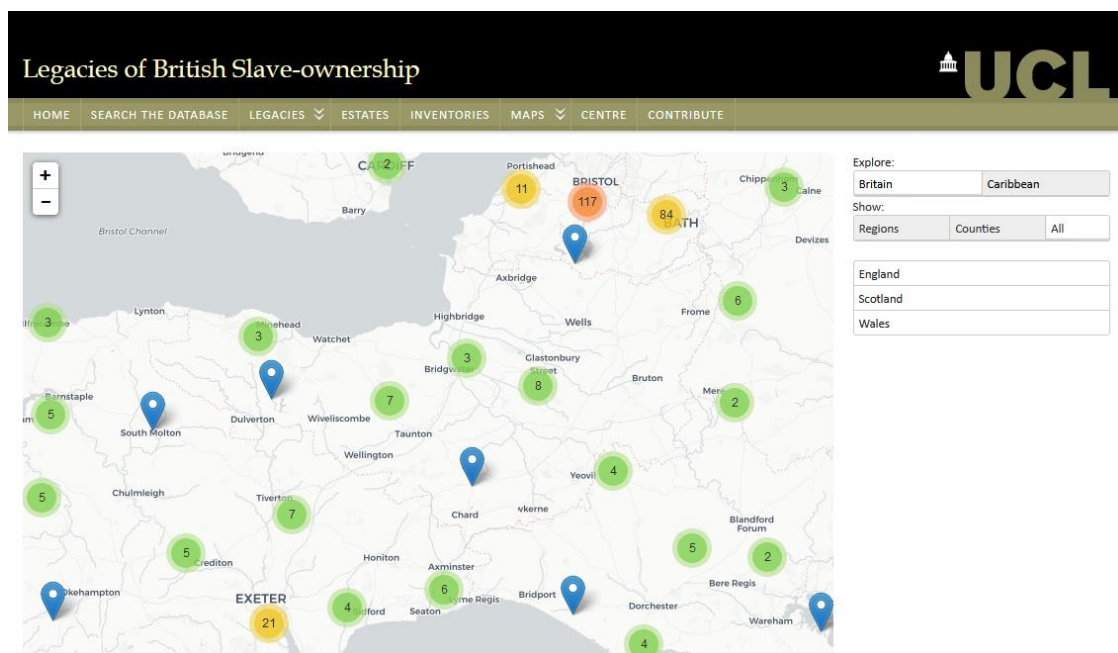
Throwing some light on the dark history of slave ownership in Somerset

To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it (James Baldwin)

You may recall *Britain's Forgotten Slave Owners*, a BBC series presented by David Olusoga and more recently his series on a house in Bristol which at one point was owned by a slave trader. In the former programmes, David Olusoga looked at the abolition of slavery in Britain and the extraordinary choice by the government of the day to compensate slave owners for their loss of 'property'. The history of British slavery has been buried for a long time. The thousands of British families who grew rich on the slave trade, or from the sale of sugar and tobacco from slave plantations in the 17th and 18th centuries, buried those stories under the carpet. In many cases, current descendants may have just not known about this phase of their past. However, recent events have thrown this key aspect of British history into the limelight. The recent removal of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol has brought this practice into the forefront of national consciousness in Britain.

The cotton plantations of the American south were established within their home country, whereas British slavery took place thousands of miles away in the Caribbean. That geographic distance made it possible for slavery to be largely airbrushed out of British history, following the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833. We are more likely to think of the horrors of American slave plantations than those which operated in British colonies. William Wilberforce and the abolitionist crusade, first against the slave trade and then slavery itself, has become a redemptive force behind which the dark history of slavery has been concealed¹.

The records of the Slave Compensation Commission represent a near complete census of British slavery as it was on 1 August, 1834, the day the system ended. (In some parts of the Caribbean many slaves were required to serve under this apprenticeship scheme and emancipation did not become a reality for them until August 1838.) It comprised a full list of Britain's slave owners so that compensation could be paid. However, it was not until 2010 that a team from University College London began to systematically analyse the list. I have been looking at the UCL database and have pulled the following snippets from the records of people who lived in Somerset. In some cases, the details are scanty, but the map on the database is instructive in showing how widespread such holdings occurred².



Above: screenshot of the UCL website with the sites marked of the ownership record whereabouts.

Here are a few extracts:

William Helyar

He was the eldest son from a gentry family from East Coker in Somerset, William Helyar was a Colonel in the Cavalier army in the English civil war. He invested jointly with his brother Cary in establishing Bybrook estate in Jamaica in 1669. William agreed to ship supplies and labour from England while Cary developed the land. They initially planned to grow cacao but following a blight in 1670-1671 they turned their attention to sugar cultivation. Cary Helyar bought 160 acres of unworked land from John and Mary Ridgeway (which the Ridgeways had patented a few months previously) and was granted a further 466 acres adjacent to the Ridgeways' plot by Modyford.

In his first year he bought 12 enslaved people and hired white servants to work on establishing a cacao grove. By the death of Cary Helyar in July 1692, Bybrook had expanded to 1236 acres and the Helyar brothers had invested £1,858 on the property, of which £1,205 was spent purchasing 55 enslaved people. 24 acres of sugar cane had been planted, although no crop had yet been harvested. Cary Helyar bequeathed his moiety to his assistant William Whaley, who conveyed it to William Helyar along with Cary Helyar's debts.

On the death of manager William Whaley in 1676, Bybrook was valued at £2,737, excluding the value of the land and sugar works, with 104 enslaved people. The total value was probably in the region of £4,000. It had 'eighty acres in sugar cane and an exceptionally large sugar works with a water mill, six coppers in the boiling house, three stills in the distillery, and five hundred sugar pots in the curing house. No other Jamaican estate inventoried between 1674 and 1678 possessed so many slaves and servants.'

William Tuckett

The erstwhile Distributor under the Stamp Act for St Kitts, 'subject to rough music by a crowd there in 1766 and fleeing to Nevis'. He was said to have amassed wealth in the West Indies. To date no direct slave-ownership has been traced for him but he was identified in the will of John Richardson Herbert as holding a mortgage over an estate [and almost certainly enslaved people] on Nevis belonging to Herbert's brother-in-law Magnus Morton. William Tuckett was Mayor of Bridgwater at the time of the Bridgwater petition against the slave-trade in 1785. Extract of a letter from Bridgwater, July 23 [1772]: 'On Monday last Wm. Tuckett, Esq., lately arrived from the West Indies, having amassed a considerable fortune in those parts, was unanimously elected to the office of Recorder of our ancient Corporation'.



Image Library of Congress by William Berryman, who spent time in Jamaica from 1808 to 1815 and worked on various plantations

John Atkins of Ashcott 1758 - 1840

In his will, he left his inheritance of lands in England and Jamaica, and the legacy of £1000 to each of his children, under the will of his mother Elizabeth White. He left his plantation or sugar works in the parish of Trelawney Jamaica called Forest 'with the negro grounds thereunto belonging' and adjoining land he had recently purchased at Duan Vale amounting in whole to 1288 and a half acres, 'with all my rights to or respecting my Negro apprentices', to his wife Maria during her widowhood for life, subject to a payment of £500 p.a. to his son William. He left property in Somerset, various farms as well as the Ashcott estate to his various children. In particular, he left his son Charles White Atkins his land, wharf buildings etc. at the Rock in Trelawney and further land opposite the wharf in Falmouth Harbour in Jamaica, together with his two shares in the Falmouth Water Company out there.

John Paine Tudway 1775 - 1835

He was the son of Robert Tudway of Wells, Somerset who was the younger brother of Clement Tudway, barrister and MP for Wells, 1761-1815). In 1815, John Paine Tudway became, following the death of his uncle Clement, sole heir to estates in Somerset and Parham Hill, Antigua, and also inherited from his uncle Clement the parliamentary seat for Wells, 1815-30. In the course of John Paine Tudway's ownership, a new estate, Parham Lodge, appears to have been established on Antigua with 193 enslaved people transferred to it from the pre-existing Parham Old Works estate between 1824 and 1828. According to The History of Parliament which follows Vere Langford Oliver, he 'disposed of the Antigua estate on his son's coming of age in 1829' which consisted of 1,096 acres and 600 enslaved.' In fact, his son Robert Charles Tudway took on the estates.

Catherine Stapleton 1734 - 1815

Catherine Stapleton was a slave-owner on St Kitts, holding at her death six-eighths of an estate or estates on St Kitts, which she left in to her nephews Rev. William Cotton, and Lynch Cotton and to Robert Henry Stapleton Cotton, then the only son of her third nephew Stapleton Cotton. She seems to have been known as Mrs Catherine Stapleton although unmarried. She was an active absentee owner of the estates and enslaved people, in 1776 buying in the interests of Sir Robert Cotton and Watkin Williams in Stapletons [also known as Fountains] on St Kitts and Russells Rest in Nevis for £18,000 each, a transaction that appears to have strained her financially for several decades thereafter. 'From 1805 onwards there was a marked increase in the crop of the Nevis estate, and between 1796 and 1810 an average of 166 hogsheads was sold each year. The plantation in St. Christopher also maintained a fairly high level of production, with an average crop of 110 hogsheads between 1789 and 1809.

This level of production, linked with an artificial and temporary inflation in the price of sugar during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, finally ended the deadlock between Catherine Stapleton's income and expenses. By 1811, for the first time since 1776, the debt on her current account with the sugar merchants had been cleared. The remainder of her debts had been consolidated into a mortgage for £12,000 on her West Indian property. From 1800 to 1810 this had been held by Alexander Hood, Admiral Viscount Bridport. It had then been transferred to Sir Peter Warburton, of Arley, Chester.

On the death of Warburton in 1813 the trustees of his estate refused to continue the mortgage, and demanded repayment of the money. They finally threatened foreclosure of a bill in Chancery, to gain possession of the West Indian property, if the money was not paid by February 1815. Catherine Stapleton, now aged 81, was faced by the gravest financial crisis of her life. She was saved only by the sympathy of her sugar agents, Messrs. Manning and Anderdon, who took the unusual step of offering collateral security for her debt. They arranged for half of her debt to be paid at once, and the remainder in annual instalments. This transaction saved the plantations, but stripped her of her very last financial resources.

Hon. George Neville Grenville 1789 - 1854

Grenville lived at Butleigh Court and was holder of part of the Hope Estate in Jamaica Sugar and Rum which had up to 400 slaves in the early nineteenth century.

Robert McGhie 1752 - 1815

He was a slave-owner in Trelawney Jamaica and lived at Upcott House, Bishops Hull, Somerset. He left two plantations or sugarworks called the Retreat and Hampstead, and 'those other estates commonly called or known by the name Coxheath Pen, Mount Lebanon, Belle Vue, Grays Inn and Cyder [sic] Grove commonly called Macfarlanes' containing 3500 acres, with all the negroes, slaves, live and dead stock thereto belonging, and the property belonging to him that had belonged to his brothers James and Jonathan McGhie, together with his property in Great Britain, in trust for his wife and children, and instructed that his trustees account annually in Chancery in Jamaica or Britain for their payments and receipts'.

Roger Evans on the BBC website notes other families involved in the trade and holdings of slaves as well as another side of the slavery story in Somerset:

*Deep in the Somerset countryside, well away from the unseemly trade in human beings, wealthy families built their grand homes using the profits from plantations which benefitted from the slave trade. **Henry Hobhouse**, whose family were slave traders, acquired property in Castle Cary.*

Caleb Dickinson, owner of a Jamaican plantation, purchased King Weston House near Somerton.

The Tudway family of Wells owned plantations in Antigua, although they rarely, if ever, visited the islands, where they would have witnessed the appalling conditions under which the slaves survived. Just two of their plantations recorded 583 slaves in bondage.

He continues: *the wealth of these few families depended on slavery. Elsewhere in the county, there was strong support for the abolition of the slave trade. Slavery by the British began in the mid-17th century. By 1685, at the time of the Monmouth Rebellion, it was in full swing. After the Battle of Sedgemoor and the ensuing Bloody Assizes, when hundreds were hung, drawn and quartered, the King granted permission for convicted rebels to be taken into slavery. With hundreds of Somerset men being transported, local feeling against slavery ran high. These were not the wealthy landowners, but yeoman of strong religious convictions, condemned into slavery.*

In total, 612 Somerset men were transported into slavery. They sailed in eight ships to the West Indies. Many died during the voyage. Some died on the quayside awaiting their auction. Within four years, the survivors were granted free pardons but most lacked the fare home. Those who returned told their families and communities of life as a slave. It was Bridgwater which was the first town, in 1785, to petition parliament for the abolition of slavery³.

The story of Hannah More (1745-1833) is featured by the South West Heritage Trust⁴. She became a national celebrity as an author and philanthropist, but her story is little known today.

Hannah More was born at Fishponds, near Bristol, one of five daughters of a schoolmaster, and gained early fame in London as a playwright. She counted David Garrick, Joshua Reynolds and Samuel Johnson as her friends, and was a member of the group of women intellectuals called the Bluestockings.

In 1787 she met William Wilberforce and shared his passionate opposition to the slave trade. She became one of Wilberforce's most important supporters, writing her poem 'Slavery' as part of his campaign to achieve abolition. During a visit Wilberforce made to her home near Wrington, they witnessed terrible poverty. Wilberforce encouraged her to set up a school in Cheddar where poor children could be taught to read, and soon she and her sisters had established similar schools throughout the Mendip villages. The sisters also held evening classes for adults and set up women's friendly societies such as the Cheddar Female Club. Hannah faced fierce opposition from local farmers and clergy who deeply mistrusted her work.



Both Hannah More and William Wilberforce died in 1833, surviving just long enough to know that the Act abolishing slavery in the British Empire had finally been passed. She was buried next to her sisters in the churchyard at Wrington, not far from their old home at Barley Wood. A great procession of Mendip children followed her to her grave.

Image left: Hannah More by Henry William Pickersgill, oil on canvas, 1821

Gone are the times when we can ignore this part of our history which was catastrophic for millions of people and their descendants. We don't know what these Somerset slave owners thought of their involvement in faraway plantations: many of them were absentees. But the general acceptance of the slave trade and plantation ownership was based on race and this has had consequences which persist today. Learning about it, as James Baldwin said, means that we can start to use it to interrogate and trounce the racist attitudes and behaviours of our past and present.

But this is just a start. The work of UCL continues and the links below point to other initiatives taking place which document this dark history, so that we can acknowledge Britain's colonial past and its effects on society today.

MC

References

- 1 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/12/british-history-slavery-buried-scale-revealed> Accessed 20 June 2020
- 2 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/> and <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/maps/britain> Accessed 20 June 2020
- 3 http://www.bbc.co.uk/somerset/content/articles/2007/02/19/abolition_somerset_and_slavery_feature.shtml Accessed 20 June 2020)
- 4 SWHT <https://swheritage.org.uk/hannah-more/> Accessed 20 June 2020

For further reading, try these links:

- http://www.understandingslavery.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=312_emancipation&catid=125_themes&Itemid=224.html
- http://www.understandingslavery.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=348&Itemid=149.html
- <https://www.slavevoyages.org>
- <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-transatlantic-slave-trade-records/>
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/yXTlPdMckSTLMhHsYmMwfl/black-history-find-out-more>

A few books to look at:

Legacies of British Slave Ownership: Colonial slavery and formation of Victorian Britain (CUP 2014). Katie Donington, Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland, Rachel Lang.

Black Ivory: Slavery in the British Empire (Fontana 1993) (2nd Edition Wiley 2001). James Walvin

Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire (Two Roads 2018). Akala