

Dover's Slave Owners

Ann Tomalak

The slave trade is an ignoble part of British history, long ignored. But recently we have been forced to take another look at it by public demonstrations, the toppling of statues, and discussions of the ways slave owners used their wealth to win prestige and power at home.

Essentially, the trans-Atlantic slave trade involved the transportation of people from Central and West Africa to the Americas, where they laboured on plantations and in other industries. The fruits of their work were then shipped back to Europe to be sold for profit. But they were not migrant workers in the modern sense. They were captured in raids and sold as slaves to European owners. We will never know how many were transported during the three centuries from 1526, but a recent estimate suggests 12 million, with millions more dying en route.

With the discovery of the Americas, the British settled along the east coast and in the West Indies. The islands had the perfect climate to grow sugar cane in particular, but there was insufficient local labour. By the late 17th century, one in four ships leaving Liverpool was engaged in the triangular slave trade, carrying goods to Africa to be exchanged for slaves, which were taken across the Atlantic. The ships then brought home items like cotton and rum but, above all, sugar, which was in great demand.

By the beginning of the 19th century, people such as William Wilberforce were noisily opposing the slave trade. In 1807 an

Act was passed which prevented slaves being carried on British ships. However, it was still legal to own and trade slaves until the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. Even then, most were re-designated as "apprentices" and had to continue working for their former masters for another five or seven years. The 1833 Act only passed because the British government made available £20m as compensation (40% of Treasury income at the time, a debt finally paid off in 2015) to be paid to the owners, not the former slaves!

Records of the claims for compensation have been held by The National Archives since that time, largely forgotten. But at the beginning of the 21st century University College London began a series of projects investigating aspects of British slave ownership. They have now set up The Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-ownership and continue to expand their database (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>) which is available to the public.

One ugly surprise is the number of people who made claims, 46,000 in all. Not all were technically slave-owners. Some held an interest in an entailed estate in the West Indies, or were bankers who had given a mortgage or loan to an estate owner, or were executors of a will, but all wanted compensation for the loss of "property". Among those who could be classed as slave-owners, not all were rich and powerful. Slaves were a good investment for the respectable middle classes. Because slaves were treated like other property, 25% of

claimants were women, who inherited slaves from husbands or fathers, sometimes as their sole income.

The other awful truth is that the compensation money, like the income from the slave trade previously, was reinvested here in a multitude of other projects. It fuelled the industrial revolution, developed infrastructure, bought influence and bolstered philanthropy. The UCL database lists thousands of British companies, public institutions, museum collections, stately homes, political legacies and appointments that owe their existence to money from slavery. Wherever we look, the buildings, institutions and organisations that give us pride today are likely tainted by slavery, even in Dover.

The UCL database lists 214 claimants in Kent. Of these, six have Dover addresses.

Helena de Rochemont Maxwell lived at 5 Marine Place. The 1851 census describes her as an 'officer's widow', aged 54, born in the West Indies. She was living with her daughters Susan (aged 25, born in Jamaica), Henrietta (aged 21, born in Kent) and Louisa (aged 19, born in Ireland). By 1861, Helena (now giving her age as 67) was living in Mortimer Street, Marylebone, London, with Susan. She died there in May 1868, aged 73. The second daughter, Henrietta, had died a spinster at 5 Marine Place, Dover, in October 1863. Administration of her estate, worth less than £100, was granted ten years later to her sister, Susan, also a spinster, then living in Folkestone.

Helena was awarded the compensation money for one enslaved person on Curacao in 1863.

This suggests her husband left her and their three daughters comfortable, but not

wealthy, with various assets including a family house and, presumably, other investments, among them a single slave. With roots in the West Indies, they would have had first-hand knowledge of the slave trade.

Elizabeth Wood Arrowsmith nee Wallace, was previously married to Edward Atherton (born 21/08/1768). Edward's uncle William (d. 1803) owned Green Park and Spring Vale Pen estates in Jamaica, which he bequeathed to his brother John. John then bequeathed to Edward half of the Jamaican estates and £35,000 in trust to buy property.

Edward Atherton married Elizabeth Wood Smith, a widow of Dover, Kent, in Marylebone in December 1818. He was buried in St James, Dover, in August 1820 and his will was proved the following year. As his widow, Elizabeth inherited an annuity from his property (the estate slaves included), even though she got married again in March 1821 to Harrison Arrowsmith of Camberwell, London.

The Atherton family retained an interest in their Jamaican estates until 1910. Green Park produced sugar, rum and cattle and had around 550 slaves. Spring Vale Pen (nearly 200 slaves) additionally produced corn, coffee, cotton and other livestock like mules, reminding us that not everything was exported; money could also be made from the local economy.

John Hamilton (1782-1859), was tenant-in-tail (i.e. next in line to benefit from an entailed estate) of the Riseland and Indian Walk plantations, Tobago, which he inherited from his father, also John Hamilton. John Sr. (b. 1744) was owner of several estates in Tobago by 1789, "a gentleman of considerable property and influence on the island". He also set up a United Brethren ministry there.

John Jr. was born in Tobago in 1782, but educated at Eton (where the notes say "owned most of the Island of Tobago") and Cambridge. The compensation records give his address as Cliff, near Rochester, but by the 1851 census he was living at 8 Guildford Lawn, Dover, with his daughters Susannah and Margaret, three female servants and one male servant. He is described as a "West India Proprietor", age 68. John Jr's brother, the Rev. James Hamilton, had a claim on his father's estates too.

John Jr. also had sons, Henry Rose Hamilton and the Rev. John Hamilton. Henry's will describes him as "administering the Government of the Island of Montserrat", and leaves estates there (400 acres), plus a town house, to his wife and children. Henry and his son, William (the next tenant-in-tail), give Guildford Lawn as their address for the claim. The Tobago estates had more than 400 slaves, those on Montserrat 276.

George Mathew (d. 1846) was originally to inherit estates in Tobago and Antigua from his father, Daniel. But Daniel revoked the bequest in 1776 and ordered the estates sold, with George receiving instead £10,000 and the purchase money for a lieutenantancy in the Guards. However, George also inherited an estate called Willoughby's on Antigua from one Archibald Cochran. George died in Switzerland, but his will says he was "formerly of Dover". He left substantial sums in cash and stocks to his children. There is no further mention of Willoughby's, but his nephews, Charles and Frederick Gambier, made unsuccessful compensation claims for estates on St Kitts with 300 slaves. It would be good to think Daniel had a conscience but, most likely, he needed ready cash.

Emma Reignolds neé Absolon, (1811-1874) married her husband, Robert, in

fashionable St George's Church, Hanover Square, London in 1835. In the 1841 census, they and their three young daughters were living in York Street, Dover. Robert's father had died at Waterloo. His mother was the daughter of Richard Welch of Jamaica.

Together with her brother-in-law, Thomas Scott Reignolds, Emma was awarded a small part of the compensation for the Hyde estate in Jamaica (147 slaves, sugar and rum) as part of a consortium of mortgage holders. About 1855, Emma and her daughters moved to America and became actresses. Emma died in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1874. Her daughter, Catherine Mary, known as Kate, made quite a name for herself on the stage. She married Alfred Winslow (thus narrowly avoiding being the original Kate Winslet).

Crisp Molineux Montgomerie (1783-1850) is described as "of Dover" both in his will and in a family memorial window in the church of St John the Baptist, Garboldisham, Norfolk. He was the main heir under the trust will of his grandfather, Crisp Molineux, as well as inheriting from his father, George. He made a joint claim with his mother, Elizabeth, and brother, Thomas, for the Tomlinson estate on Antigua (145 slaves). Thomas received further compensation for the Nicola Town estate on St Kitts (175 slaves, producing sugar). The wider Molineux family also had estates on Montserrat, and may have been known to Henry Hamilton.

Three other local men made claims: Henry Dawkins and heirs. The first Henry (1728-1814) is listed as "of Portman Square [London] and Jamaica". His son, Henry II, was an MP for Yorkshire constituencies which his son, Henry III, later took over. In 1821, the family built Encombe Park at

Sandgate, Folkestone, with funds derived from the Jamaica trade. Henry III made compensation claims for the York estate (400plus slaves, sugar, rum, livestock and metals) and Gales Valley estate (250 slaves, sugar and rum).

In 1924, Encombe House featured in Country Life magazine, with new owners and a newly renovated interior, well-illustrated by photographs. It was destroyed by fire in 1978.

James Alured McLean (1871-1881), was living at Langhorne Gardens, Folkestone, with his much-younger wife, Maria, at the time of his death. He was described as a "landed proprietor" born in Jamaica, though claim documents say "of Bordeaux, in the kingdom of France." In the 1871 census of Langhorne Gardens, he is an "English and foreign bondholder." He made a claim on the Main Savanna estate in

Jamaica as mortgagee. The award was split with the owners, George and Sarah Townsend, but James got almost all of the compensation. The estate produced sugar and had 140-180 slaves. Maria died ten years after James, a wealthy widow, leaving about £12,000.

George Joad, (d. 1837), was a London ropemaker, shipping agent and mortgage lender, with homes in Blackheath and Walmer. Among his clients were two London merchants, John Plummer and William Wilson, and the descendants of a planter, Thomas Kaylet. The case was quite complicated as Plummer and Wilson declared bankruptcy, but Joad still received compensation from their estates in Jamaica, Anchovy Bottom (231 slaves, producing sugar and rum) and "Mount Thirza" (the details correspond to Mount Zion in St Elizabeth parish, some 200 slaves over three plantations, one of which produced coffee and also rented out slaves). Additionally, Joad received compensation for the Maverly estate (224 slaves, producing sugar, rum and molasses).

Joad's son, also George, born 1837, left more than £91,000 when he died in 1881, though we cannot know how much of that inherited wealth was from the slave trade.

British complicity in slavery was never just about a few rich people getting statues. It permeated the whole of British society. Many estates (and their slaves) were owned by groups of people, each drawing a small income, spent on goods and services in their home communities. By the 19th century many estates were mortgaged, some failing. The compensation money wasn't returned to help the West Indies but invested in new projects in Britain. It kick-started the development of the modern era and made us what we are. Slavery's legacy is with us still, mostly unacknowledged.

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**Trafalgar House Gordon Road Whitfield
Dover Kent CT16 3PN**