

Government compensation for slave-owners in Devon

When slavery was abolished in the UK almost 200 years ago, following the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, it marked a successful end to decades of campaigning by figures like William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson. What is less well known is that huge amounts of government money were spent to compensate owners for their economic losses. Thousands of British families owned slaves, and the Government set aside £20M to be distributed among slave owners as compensation.

What was the impact in Devon? Tens of thousands of Caribbean slaves were owned by wealthy residents of Devon who received compensation, among whom we find:

- the then Bishop of Exeter Henry Philpotts who, in a partnership with others, received £12,729 for the loss of 665 slaves in Jamaica. This is the equivalent of over £m today.

- Honiton MP Hugh Duncan Baillee, the son of a Bristol merchant who traded in the West Indies. He had acquired 15 plantations with more than 1600 slaves.

The history of slavery in Devon has been researched by Lucy MacKeith and published by the Archives and Museum of Black Heritage.

McKeith writes: "People at all levels of society were involved: sheep farmers, spinners and weavers who created cloth which was exported to Africa and the Americas, wool traders in Exeter, bootmakers, food producers, metal workers who produced the slave chains, ship builders, and bronze founders who made the manillas (a kind of bracelet) which were used as money in the slave trade. The list goes on. Probably most families in Devon benefited.

"There were sugar-processing factories in Devon – at the Bishop's Palace in Exeter, the Retreat in Topsham, and in Goldsmith Street, Exeter." And of course Devon's position in the South West, and its major port of Plymouth, meant it was heavily involved in the business of transatlantic slave trade.

Devonian abolitionists

But Devonians also played their part in the abolition of the slave trade and slavery. "There were sermons in churches and numerous meetings were held in cities, towns and villages throughout Devon to call for the abolition of the slave trade and to collect signatures for petitions to Parliament. William Davy, from Exeter, was the one of the two counsels for James Somerset, a recaptured slave who fought to be free in the famous Somerset case of 1772," writes McKeith. In Devon, as elsewhere in England and in America, Quakers had been leaders of the abolitionist movement since the 1670s. An anti-slavery leaflet, first published in Plymouth in 1788, became a key document in the nationwide abolitionist movement. Nine Quakers sat on the 12-strong Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, established on 22 May 1787. A fellow member, Thomas Clarkson, launched similar committees around the country. Clarkson was also largely responsible for recruiting into the anti-slavery

campaign the inspiring parliamentarian William Wilberforce, whose name is the one we associate most closely with the abolition of slavery.

The abolition story continues ...

To find out more about the fascinating story of the abolition of slavery, come and see *Nine parts a Quaker – Unfinished Business*. The play tells the story of Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, but also asks some challenging questions about slavery in our own day. The work of Clarkson, Wilberforce and others remains unfinished: human trafficking and indentured labour are widespread. What can we do to break these modern chains?

Nine parts a Quaker – Unfinished Business will be performed by 'Plain Quakers' at Tavistock United Reformed Church on Saturday 15 June, at 7pm.